

THE DYNAMICS OF ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

by

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Participation is the lifeblood of democracy, involving different numbers of people in different activities at different times. Maintaining viable party organizations requires the commitment of a few people over a considerable period. Campaigning, lobbying, or protesting require a greater commitment by more people, but over a shorter period. Voting requires a minimum commitment for a brief period, but involves by far the greatest number of people. In a book primarily about elections it seems natural to focus on voting. Indeed, the health of a democracy is often seen in terms of its level of turnout.

This chapter starts by examining variations in voting turnout by country, variations over time, and variations by social characteristics. In seeking to explain these variations we consider three theories that have dominated research in this area since the start of behavioral political studies -- one based on individual resources, one based on political mobilization, and one based on instrumental motivation. The central argument in this chapter is that *instrumental motivation*, largely determined by the context in which elections are held, has been unduly neglected yet plays a critical role in driving variations in electoral turnout. The salience of elections, the use of compulsory voting and postal voting, and the presence of a highly competitive party system provide the most plausible explanations of cross-national differences in voting turnout because these influence the costs and benefits of casting a ballot.

However, it is not enough to be able to explain the differences between countries in average turnout. Any such explanation is incomplete if it cannot also explain changes in turnout within countries from one election to the next. This is a chapter about the dynamics of electoral participation. It demonstrates that the same variables accounting for country differences also account for a large part of the differences in turnout that occur with the passage of time. In over-time perspective we focus on aspects of the competitiveness of the electoral situation -- the closeness of the race and the likelihood that one party will win control of the legislature -- as prime candidates for explaining turnout variations.

We measure turnout, except in the United States, in terms of the number of those voting as a percent of registered voters. In the United States the denominator in the calculation is derived from the voting age population.¹ In studying turnout, we will use three different datasets: one containing survey responses from individuals living in 23 countries in the early 1990s, another containing cross-sectional data relating to average turnout between 1960 and 1985 in an overlapping set of 31 countries, and a third containing time-series data relating to turnout in the successive elections conducted in each of these 31 countries between 1945 and 1999.

Turnout in Democracies

We can begin by comparing turnout in 40 democracies. Table 10.1 shows average turnout in these countries (ordered by turnout) at free elections for the lower house conducted between 1960 and 1999, along with the number of elections upon which each average is based.² Countries marked with * in Table 10.1 are countries for which we have obtained survey data from the early 1990s. These countries are used in the individual-level analyses reported later in this chapter. Countries marked with # in Table 10.1 are countries for which systemic characteristics have been compiled by Katz (1997). These countries are used in the country-level analyses reported later in this chapter. Since the systemic characteristics are reported by Katz for the period 1960-1985, turnout in the country-level analyses is also restricted to that period. The period is one of stability in electoral arrangements impacting significantly on turnout, which makes it a convenient window in which to look at the country-level effects of independent variables.³ Later in the chapter we will analyse data for free elections conducted between 1945 and 1999 in these countries. Because those data are presented in the context of an over-time analysis, changes in the characteristics of particular countries can be accommodated. The overlapping datasets provide a snapshot of electoral participation across a wide variety of political

systems including those with emerging and established democratic institutions, parliamentary and presidential systems, and very different electoral and party systems.

TABLE 10.1 ABOUT HERE

Turnout has varied somewhat over the fifty years since the end of the Second World War. Figure 1 plots average turnout for elections grouped into five-year intervals for 23 of the countries marked with # in Table 10.1 (all except Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, India, Portugal, Spain, and Venezuela, for which the series does not extend back to the 1940s). The broken line on that graph

FIGURE 10.1 ABOUT HERE

shows what appears to be a precipitous decline in turnout, starting in the late 1950s; however, too much should not be made of this. In the first place, turnout during the late 1950s was at a historically high point, as Topf (1995) has pointed out. In the second place, the amount of change is greatly exaggerated by the scale used to plot the broken line (on the right-hand side of the graph). The unbroken line at the top of the graph gives a more balanced perspective by presenting the decline on a scale that has zero as its minimum. In fact, the net change in turnout between 1945 and 1999 is only 4.4 percentage points – a very small amount compared to the differences between countries shown in Table 10.1. Nevertheless, we will give consideration to the apparent decline in turnout when we later investigate the reasons for turnout change.

Who participates?

Tables 10.1 and 10.2 show turnout variations between countries and across the social characteristics of individuals. The most striking message is that turnout varies much more from country to country than it does between different types of individuals. It matters whether one is rich or poor, educated or uneducated, interested in politics or not; but none of these things matter nearly as much as whether one is an Australian or an American. Five countries show turnout averaging 90 percent or more, while six

show turnout averaging 50-60 percent -- an average difference across these eleven countries of nearly 40 percent. No difference in turnout levels across categories of individuals averages more than two-thirds as much. The strongest individual-level effect that might be subject to manipulation -- political discussion -- averages only 13 percent (83.1 less 69.7 in Table 10.2). Individual-level differences are very similar across Eastern and Western Europe, though greater in the United States where education accounts for a 41 percent difference in turnout levels, while age, income, and political discussion have effects that exceed 30 percent. Only the first of these differences even comes close to matching the difference between the United States and the high-turnout countries (but see footnote 4).

TABLE 10.2 ABOUT HERE

To make it clear that within-country effects never approach between-country effects, the final columns of Table 10.2 compare the variance explained by particular variables with that explained by country differences in a two-way analysis of variance. Only three variables have more than a tenth of the explanatory power of country differences and only one has more than a fifth (that one being age, a variable hardly subject to manipulation).

This comparison suggests that if one wants to increase electoral participation in a low-turnout country, the answer lies not in increasing levels of education or prevalence of political discussion of the citizens of that country -- the only individual-level characteristics that appear amenable to manipulation. Even if everyone in the United States were college educated, for example, this would not bring turnout there even to levels found in medium-turnout countries such as Britain.⁴ Of course the effect of education might be additive with effects of political interest, party identification, and other variables so as to cumulatively raise turnout considerably; or the effects of those other variables might be largely subsumed by education. This question can only be evaluated by means of multivariate analysis (see below). In the meantime, our preliminary findings clearly imply that to

increase the level of turnout in the United States, India, or Switzerland, we need to establish what factors make people more likely to participate in some countries than in others, and then see whether these factors can be imported by the low turnout countries (cf. Powell 1986).

Why participate?

Although a great many theories have been proposed to explain variations in political participation, these essentially boil down to explanations involving three different features that distinguish people from one-another: *resources*, *mobilization*, and the desire to affect the course of public policy (what we shall call *instrumental motivation*). Resources are what people individually bring to the democratic process: knowledge, wealth, and time. Mobilization is the heightened awareness of their role that can be inculcated in people through the operations of the media, parties, and groups. Instrumental motivation is the sense that individuals may have that their actions (at least taken in concert with the actions of other individuals who share the same concerns) might affect an election outcome.

Of these, the resource theory of political participation has been most widely studied. According to this theory, people participate who have the skills, time and money to do so (Verba and Nie, 1972). The trouble with this approach is that it cannot explain the large differences in turnout that exist between countries. We have already seen that differences in turnout by levels of education and income are less than differences in turnout by country. Moreover, high turnout countries do not have richer or more educated people than low turnout countries. Indeed two of the richest and most highly educated countries (Switzerland and the United States) are among the lowest in terms of turnout.

Taking account of the activities of groups and organizations (especially unions and political parties) has recently gained prominence in studies of political participation (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Gray and Caul 2000). However, variations in mobilizing

activities do not go far towards remedying the problems of the resource approach. According to Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), citizens (even those with most resources) are more likely to participate if encouraged to do so, and one source of encouragement comes from efforts made to "get out the vote." Yet in European countries, at least in the context of the European elections of 1989, country differences in mobilizing activities are smaller even than country differences in education or political interest.⁵

Both the resource and the mobilization theories indirectly address the instrumental motivations of citizens to affect the course of public policy. Those whose education and experience lead them to feel politically efficacious will vote because they are motivated to do so; and those who are mobilized to vote are evidently motivated by this mobilization (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). The role of the election *contest* as a source of instrumental motivation, however, has often been neglected by scholars who focus on the behavior of individuals. Among scholars who study differences between countries, on the other hand, the importance of institutional and contextual differences in affecting turnout has been a major theme in the literature of political participation since the earliest studies (Tingsten 1937; Crewe 1981; Powell 1980, 1986; Jackman 1987; Jackman and Miller 1995); and a link can be made between institutions and motivations if we consider differences between elections in how much is at stake (van der Eijk, Franklin, et al. 1996, chapter 19). An election that does not decide the disposition of executive power (an election for the European Parliament or a U.S. midterm election, for example) can be expected to prove less important (and therefore less likely to motivate voter turnout) than a national election in Europe, or an American presidential election. If executive power is at stake, then we would expect that more people will turn out -- especially if the election is a close one, the outcome seems likely to determine the course of public policy, and there are large perceived differences between policy alternatives. For example, the unprecedentedly high turnout in

the 1992 Louisiana gubernatorial primary contested by the ex Klu Klux Klan member David Duke shows the possible consequences in terms of turnout of an election whose outcome is expected to be close and whose protagonists arouse strong feelings.

This also means that an electoral system that ensures no votes are wasted will presumably motivate more people to vote; and that a country like Switzerland, where the outcome of parliamentary elections has no discernible policy implications (because the same coalition will take office whatever the outcome and all important policy decisions are in any case subject to referendum) will see lower turnout than a country like Malta, where the fact that there is a uni-cameral legislature with no other level of government (no mayors, no local government) means that every important political decision hangs on the outcome of a single electoral contest (Hirczy 1995). Of course, the mobilization approach can also to some extent take account of differing electoral contexts since important elections will stimulate more electoral activity by parties and candidates; but the instrumental approach subsumes such activities. A contest that stimulates voters to turn out in large numbers will evidently also stimulate parties and candidates to redouble their efforts to obtain the participation of those who might still stay at home.

In brief, the instrumental approach to understanding electoral participation is superior to the other two common approaches because it largely subsumes them both, while explaining additional aspects that neither of the other approaches can address. Indeed, this approach is the only one that makes sense when we focus on the importance of the electoral context in conditioning people's motivations; and only differences in context show promise of explaining country differences in turnout.

Nevertheless, the fact that instrumental motivation has mainly to do with the benefits of voting should not blind us to the fact that voting also involves costs. Countries may differ not only in terms of how important elections seem to voters but also in terms of how difficult it is to vote. Later we will

describe some relevant ways in which countries differ from each other in these respects, but first we need to validate what so far has merely been suggested: that what matters in explaining turnout are differences between countries not differences between individuals.

Effects on individual-level electoral participation

We saw earlier that differences between types of individual in terms of turnout were generally much less than differences between countries. The implication of that finding was that individual-level differences have less effect than country-level differences. This implication can be more formally confirmed if we conduct a multivariate analysis that attempts to explain individual-level electoral participation on the basis of demographic and other characteristics of individuals, and contrast the effects with those that can be seen when the country contexts in which individuals find themselves are taken into account. Such an analysis can assess the cumulative effects of many attributes at once, in contrast to our earlier descriptive approach.

A great many variables have been suggested as determining the resources that individuals bring to the participatory context and the success of parties in mobilizing these voters to turn out. In the data available to us for twenty-three countries (those of Western and Eastern Europe, together with the United States), relatively few variables are included that are relevant to electoral mobilization -- only strength of party identification and extent of political discussion might be construed as variables that would make voters responsive to mobilizing efforts. However, other analysis of specifically West European data (van der Eijk, Franklin, et al. 1996) has shown that campaign mobilization contributed less than one eighth of total individual-level effects on electoral participation; and the resource variables at our disposal do include most of those suggested in past research (cf. van der Eijk, Franklin et al. 1996; Oppenhuis 1995).

TABLE 10.3 ABOUT HERE

Table 10.3 shows the effects of variables found to have statistically significant (at the 0.001 level) influences on individual-level electoral participation in three separate models: the first where only individual-level influences are considered,⁶ the second where these effects are considered within their national contexts,⁷ and the third where missing data indicators are taken into account.⁸ As can be seen, individual-level characteristics explain only 5.5 percent of variance in electoral participation. Taking account of national context (in the central column of the table) multiplies this variance explained virtually fourfold. Taking account of missing data adds trivially (but significantly) to variance explained.⁹ Effects (b) of the variables included in the table are readily interpretable. The important finding is the extent to which national context (indicated in the table by average country effects) exceeds in importance the effects of individual-level variables. This is shown not only in terms of variance explained but also in the size of the average country effect. Explicating these country differences is the purpose of the next section.

Country differences in the costs and benefits of voting

We have already suggested that the extent to which policy outputs are expected to depend on an election outcome will be important in determining both the costs of failing to vote and the benefits of voting. Our example was Switzerland -- a country where election results for the lower house are hardly linked to the political complexion of the executive. Another country with tenuous linkage between legislative election outcomes and government complexion is the United States, where the separation of powers ensures that even if a party wins control of the legislature it will not necessarily be able to put its preferred policies into force. In these two countries public policy outputs evidently rest on many imponderables -- for example, interest group lobbying in the U.S.A. and referenda in

Switzerland -- that have nothing to do with the outcome of legislative elections (cf. Hirczy 1992), reducing the stakes of such elections (and hence the benefits of voting) compared to what they would be in systems where the linkage was tighter.¹⁰ A second feature of the electoral context that we have suggested will differentiate low-turnout countries from others is the number of electoral contests that are held. A country with federal as well as state elections, and frequent referenda (or propositions) is likely to see lower turnout than other countries. This feature will be hard for us to separate in practice from poor legislative/executive linkage, because the two countries in our data with least evident linkage between legislative electoral outcomes and government complexion are the same two countries (the United States and Switzerland) that have the largest number by far of electoral contests.¹¹ Because of the coincidence that these two countries are the only ones with both these reasons for low turnout, we cannot readily disentangle the two influences, and in the analyses conducted in this chapter we thus take both effects together, indicating their presence by means a dummy variable (which we refer to as "electoral salience" in the tables that follow) that picks out these two countries in contradistinction to all others. A third factor of the electoral context is the total size of the electorate, with votes perhaps counting for more in small countries like Malta than in large countries like the United States and especially India (Ratcliff 1992).

Another variable already proposed as contributing to the benefits of voting is the proportionality of the electoral system (Blais and Dobrzynska 1990; Franklin, van der Eijk and Oppenhuis 1996). A country with single-member districts and a winner-takes-all electoral system will be one in which a large number of electoral contests have foregone conclusions because one candidate is known to be virtually certain of winning. People are less likely to vote in such contests, so overall turnout will be lower than in countries where a proportional electoral system ensures that fewer votes are wasted. In this research we measure disproportionality rather than proportionality, and do so according to the

average votes/seats ratio, calculated over all parties in each country (data from Mackie and Rose 1991).¹²

A series of important variables have to do with the competitiveness of the electoral situation at the time of an election. As already mentioned, turnout is likely to be higher when a close race makes people feel that every vote counts (Jackman 1987; Blais and Dobrzynska 1990; Jackman and Miller 1995) and turnout is likely to be higher if the most recent previous election is some time in the past (Boyd 1981; LeDuc, this volume).¹³ Although not previously suggested, one aspect of competition at election time is how close the leading party is to obtaining an absolute majority. Evidently, if the largest party will be able to govern alone there is more reason to expect it to be able to put its policies into effect. A party that needs the support of other parties in order to govern is likely to have to compromise its policies, making the stakes of even a close election lower.¹⁴ Much the same reasoning leads us to suppose that a party that has much more than majority support will fail to draw people to the polls to the extent of a party whose expected support is close to 50 percent. If a party is a clear winner then the stakes of the election are lower and fewer people can be expected to vote. These three variables -- margin of victory, time since the previous election, and majority status (the absolute difference between a party's vote share and 50 percent) -- are more likely to be powerful predictors in over-time perspective. However, to the extent that countries differ in the average values of these variables we may also find them playing a role in the explanation of cross-country turnout variations; and, in fact, countries do vary from 3 percent to 26 percent in terms of the average deviation of the largest party from 50 percent, and between 2 percent and 23 percent in terms of the average margin of victory, quite enough to yield significant effects of these variables even averaged over time. Average time since the last election, however, varies only between 2 and 5 years. The fact that really short periods between elections are so rare that they are "averaged out" in cross-country perspective means

that this variable is likely to show its power only in over-time perspective.

Several potentially important variables have not yet been mentioned. Whether voter registration is automatic (as in most countries) or voluntary (as in the United States, France, and some Latin American countries) will make a difference to the number of people registered to vote and hence able to respond to a late awareness of an election's importance to them. Voluntary voter registration is the reason customarily given for low turnout in U.S. elections (Piven and Cloward 1977; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Crewe 1981).¹⁵ Whether the election occurs on a weekend or working day should evidently affect the ease with which working people can vote (Crewe 1981). In many countries compulsory voting provides an incentive to vote (even if the penalties for non-voting are nominal) and most previous studies have included this variable, while in some countries advance voting or postal voting will make it easier to obtain the participation of those away from their homes due to employment and other reasons (though this variable has only been tested across countries in the previous edition of this chapter).

Effects of country differences on turnout

Across the countries for which we have adequate data, the country characteristics we have posited as being important prove somewhat sensitive to precisely which countries are included. This can be seen in Table 10.4, which displays the findings from three different analyses. The first (Model A) focuses on the 25 countries included in Mackie and Rose's *International Almanac of Electoral History* (1991) - the only countries for which we have complete data on all the variables. The Second (Model B) adds another 6 countries for which we have most but not all of the relevant data.¹⁶ Model C repeats this analysis with Switzerland and the United States omitted.

TABLE 10.4 ABOUT HERE

The first two models explain a highly respectable 95 and 93 percent of variance in turnout, but time since the last election and the size of the electorate did not prove significant in the first of them. Eight other variables are significant in both models. Of these, by far the most potent is electoral salience. Salient elections give rise to some 30 percent greater turnout than non-salient elections. Because of the nature of this variable our findings are driven by the low turnout in Switzerland and the U.S.A., together with a plausible but unproven supposition about the reason for the anomalous turnout in these countries. These countries are omitted from the third model, with the consequence that salience plays no role in explaining turnout, but the remaining coefficients are little changed and variance explained remains high at 90 percent. In the next section we will report the results of an independent test of the importance of electoral salience in determining turnout, but first we should list the other variables that help to distinguish one country from another.

Compulsory voting, postal voting, weekend voting, and the proportionality of the electoral system between them can have an impact approaching that of electoral salience. Compulsory voting apparently increases turnout by about 6-7 percent in countries that make voting obligatory. Postal voting is worth another 5-6 percent. (Dis)proportionality is worth about half a percentage point in turnout for every percent by which the distribution of seats in the legislature approaches proportionality with the distribution of votes. Countries vary in terms of the proportionality of their electoral systems from a low of 79 in Britain to a high of 99 in Germany; that is a twenty point difference which (multiplied by 0.5) translates into a difference of about 10 percent in turnout. Sunday voting is worth 6-7 percent. Finally, from among the independent variables that will have remained relatively constant over the 25-year period investigated in this table, size of the electorate proves to have a slight effect of 0.03 to 0.04 per million voters (though this effect is significant only when the universe of

countries is extended beyond those included in the Mackie-Rose Almanac). When considering the difference in size of electorates between Malta and India, this effect could translate into differences of as much as 8 percent in turnout, but most countries would not be much affected.

Turning to the three variables whose values are not generally fixed, two of these (majority status and margin of victory) show quite strong effects of 0.2 to 0.4, giving rise to turnout differences of 4-8 percent given average differences between countries in these two characteristics reported earlier. Time since the last election proves (barely) significant only when all 31 countries are included in the analysis, presumably because (as already mentioned) countries do not in practice differ very much from each other on average in terms of this variable. Evidently, when we come to deal with specific elections, rather than averages over a series of elections, the effects of this variable could prove much stronger.

On the basis of these findings we can assert (as we have elsewhere, see van der Eijk, Franklin, et al. 1996) that there are many routes to high turnout. Electoral salience is most important, but cross-sectional findings suggest that even a country with low salience elections might raise turnout to 80 percent or more by means of compulsory voting, a highly proportional electoral system, postal voting, and weekend polling – especially if it was a country that also tended to have close elections between parties that stand a real chance of gaining a majority of the votes. However, we will see in a later section that, when these variables are indeed allowed to vary over time, not all of them have the effects that cross-sectional analysis would lead us to expect.

One proposed variable did not yield significant effects in any of the analyses. Voluntary voter registration does not seem to reduce turnout.¹⁷ This finding may come as a surprise to those who have assumed that low turnout in the United States can be largely attributed to this factor. Yet it is not possible that the factor has simply been included within the effects of low salience. Not only does

Switzerland not have voluntary voter registration, but several other countries do have this attribute. So our research design should have succeeded in detecting any general effect of voluntary voter registration. It failed to do so, reinforcing suggestions made elsewhere that the effects of this variable, even in the United States, may be less than had been supposed (see footnote 15).

Later we will return to the analysis reported above in order to elaborate it in over-time perspective, employing free elections conducted since 1945. But first we need to validate our assumptions about the importance of electoral salience.

Effects of the nature of the electoral contest on turnout

We have pointed out that the most powerful influence reported in Table 10.4 has not been unambiguously identified. Switzerland and the United States may indeed be low turnout countries because of low electoral salience, but not unless we can show that electoral salience does affect turnout. One way to validate our assumption about the centrality of electoral salience is to establish its operation in a different context. While there might be some question as to whether elections in Switzerland and the United States are of lower salience than elsewhere, there is little dispute among scholars that elections to the European Parliament are of lower salience than national elections in European countries. The difference between the two types of elections is supposedly due to the fact that national executive power is not at stake in elections to the European Parliament (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Reif 1985; van der Eijk, Franklin, et al. 1996) any more than it is in Swiss or U.S. legislative elections. But European Parliament elections have an additional feature that makes them particularly suited to investigating the importance of electoral salience: they occur at different times in relation to elections in which national political power is at stake.¹⁸

Analysis of votes cast in European elections held at different points in the national election cycle

has validated the assumption that time until the next national election can be employed as a surrogate for electoral salience (van der Eijk, Franklin, et al. 1996, 301-2). The validation did not involve a study of turnout variations. Instead it looked at the parties voters chose to support. The theory was that in elections of lowest salience – those occurring immediately after national elections – voters would have no reason to vote other than for their most favored party. Such elections have no role even as barometers of opinion, because better indicators of the standing of political parties already exist in the results of the recent national elections. However, as those most recent elections fade into the past, commentators and politicians become interested in the outcome even of elections that do not decide the allocation of political power – simply as markers of what might happen in national elections. The resulting media attention gives them more salience for voters too. The additional salience of these elections in such circumstances is attested to by the increasing tendency of voters to vote other than for their preferred party: indeed, to vote tactically in such a way as to signal their displeasure (if any) with the performance of the party they really prefer, or to signal their approval of parties they would never support in real elections (van der Eijk, Franklin, et al. 1996, 302).

In other words, even European elections become useful as vehicles for transmitting information from voters to leaders as they occur later in the electoral cycle. At such times turnout should be higher because the elections have greater salience; and it has been shown (van der Eijk, Franklin et al., 1996: 317-8) that European elections held at the start of the electoral cycle (as much as 5 years before the next national election in some countries) turnout will be 18 percent lower than turnout in European elections held on the same day as national elections. This finding does not prove that electoral salience is the variable that chiefly accounts for low turnout in the US and Switzerland, but it does confirm the importance of electoral salience – a necessary condition for our assumption to hold. So it adds plausibility to our assumption about the distinctiveness of Switzerland and the United States without

definitively ruling out other possible explanations.

Effects on turnout variations over time

Turnout not only varies between countries but also over time (which is to say within each country from one election to the next). If the theoretical approach we have adopted in this chapter is correct, these variations should be largely explicable on the basis of changes in the importance of successive elections to voters. Of course, the most important variable that changes from election to election in one country – the policy stakes of what is at issue – is a variable not readily measured in comparative perspective (but see below). However, to the extent that countries alter their electoral arrangements (adopting or discarding compulsory voting, or changing the day of the week on which elections are held, for example) these changes should give rise to turnout variations. Moreover, three variables whose average levels were already employed for differentiating between countries (majority status, the closeness of the race, and time since the most recent election) do vary considerably in practice from one election to the next. When races are tight, and when one party has a good chance of winning a majority in its own right (especially if it is a long time since the most recent previous election), we can expect turnout to be higher than when the most recent election was very recent, when the race is a foregone conclusion, or when the largest party will need to share power in a coalition government (if, indeed, it holds power at all).¹⁹

Determining the importance of different variables in conditioning turnout variations over time is complicated by the fact that successive elections in one country are not really independent events. A high turnout country will tend to have high turnout at all elections, and vice versa for low turnout countries. Treating each election as an independent event when it is not can greatly bias the estimates we make of the effects of independent variables and grossly overestimate their importance. On the other hand, taking explicit account of over-time dependencies by using a lagged version of the

dependent variable as an additional independent variable (as we do in the first of the models we present below) can attenuate the effects of independent variables: attributing to consistency some of what actually is the result of independent variables having the same effects again and again. Alternatively, we can deal with the lack of independence of successive elections by treating each country as a panel and correcting the analysis for within-panel homogeneity. By presenting both these models we hope to demonstrate that our findings are in fact very robust: we reach much the same conclusions whichever way we deal with the problem of lack of independence between successive elections.

TABLE 10.5 ABOUT HERE

Table 10.5 shows the effects of the same independent variables as were employed in Table 10.4 , but this time uses them to explain turnout variations in over-time perspective at free elections conducted in 31 countries between 1945 and 1999.²⁰ Model A does a quite respectable job of explaining turnout variations by incorporating turnout at the previous election as one of the predictors (thereby focusing on change in turnout from one election to the next). This model explains over half the variance in turnout change on average across countries. Model B does rather better by making the adjustments needed for treating each successive election as an independent replication of the test for significant effects on turnout in each country, obviating the need to include a lagged version of the dependent variable.²¹

Evidently, taking account of turnout variations over time somewhat changes the picture that we got when we considered only differences between countries. In particular, weekend voting and the proportionality of the electoral system have effects that are much reduced in over time perspective (to the point where these effects are not significant in either model). Evidently countries that move to or from Sunday voting do not thereby clearly increase or reduce their turnout, as might have been

expected from the cross-sectional findings. Equally, countries that increase or reduce proportionality in the conversion of votes into legislative seats do not see turnout clearly responding to this change. These two findings are somewhat surprising. They suggest that the cross-sectional effects of these variables are perhaps spurious, capitalizing on chance differences between countries rather than being indicative of a real effect of proportionality or of opening the polls on weekends. Alternatively, at least when considering Sunday voting, perhaps the changes in this norm mainly took place quite recently, at a time when the meaning of the Sabbath (and its implications for turnout in Sunday elections) has fundamentally changed. Other variables appear to have very much the same effects in over time perspective as they have cross-sectionally, even size of the electorate whose effects remain slight and inconclusive in over-time perspective.²²

Most interestingly, the effects of variables that do change over time are confirmed in this analysis. Time since the last election reduces turnout by close to half of a percent for each year that a government cuts short its term of office. Margin of victory reduces turnout by about one tenth of a percentage point for each one percent that the leading party runs ahead of its major competitor. The majority status of the leading party (how close it comes to gaining 50 percent of the votes) is also important, taking about one sixth of a percentage point from turnout for each one percent that the largest party deviates from 50 percent. So a country whose leading party loses support to the extent of dropping from 50 to 32 percent of votes will show an decrease in turnout of about 3 percent, while a ten percent lead over its nearest competitor will reduce turnout by a further one percent. Quite normal changes in these three variables from election to election will easily cause turnout fluctuations of 5 percent or more.

Turnout decline?

Much has been made in recent years of the supposed decline of turnout, and books and articles with titles like *The Disappearing American Voter* (Teixeira 1992) or "Exploring Declining Turnout in Western European Elections." (Flickinger and Studler 1992) are almost commonplace. In 2000, Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government was home to the "Vanishing Voter Project." We saw in Figure 1 that there does seem to have been a decline in turnout since the late 1950s of some 5.4 percentage points, on average, over the 23 countries for which we have over-time data going back that far. But this decline was from a high point in electoral turnout that may well have coincided with a series of important elections. If we measure the recent decline from the 1950-89 average, it is much more modest -- only 3.5 percent, which is considerably less than the accuracy which we can confidently predict turnout levels.

Elsewhere I have argued (Franklin, Lyons, and Marsh 2000) that the rise and decline of turnout seen in Figure 1 can perhaps be understood in terms of the changing salience of elections in established democracies. What we have found in this chapter is that voters respond to differences in the electoral context that make their votes appear more or less important; but we have not been able to measure all such differences. Above all, we have not been able to measure the importance of the issues at stake. However, we do know something about these issues. We know that in established democracies a number of critical elections were held in the late 1950s which largely resolved the long-standing conflict between labor and capital by establishing welfare states in country after country (Franklin, Mackie, Valen et al. 1992). It seems plausible that the general pattern seen in Figure 1 of first a rise and then a fall in turnout reflects the coming and the passing of a peak of interested generated by electoral decisions relating to this conflict. So elections in recent years may see lower turnout for the simple reason that these elections decide issues of lesser importance than elections did

in the late 1950s; but until we have some way to measure the substantive importance of electoral contests in terms that are comparable cross-nationally it will not be possible to be definite about this.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have shown that going to the polls is an activity motivated primarily by the desire to affect the course of public policy. It is true that the stick of compulsory voting and the carrot of postal votes do lead more people to vote than otherwise would do so, but the major factors determining turnout -- the importance of the electoral contest (what we have called electoral salience) and the likelihood that one's vote will be influential (indicated by the closeness of the race and size of the largest party) -- could only operate if people were motivated to use their votes to achieve a political goal.

A country with low salience elections and a party system that was not very competitive can easily show turnout levels 45 percent below a country with high salience elections and a highly competitive party system. Such differences arise purely from differences in the institutional and political context within which elections are conducted -- differences affecting the extent to which a political system will be responsive to the electoral choices made by voters. Voters are not fools, and an unresponsive system will motivate many fewer of them to vote.

It seems likely that voters also respond to the importance of the issues at stake, and on this basis the lower turnout seen in many countries in recent years may well be a symptom of the fact that few great issues are currently being decided at elections in most countries. But the contemporary decline in turnout, if it is even real (see footnote 1), is much smaller than commentators would often have us believe.

The fact that voters are not fools is also suggested by the extent to which they by-pass electoral

routes where those routes prove unresponsive. The United States suffers much in terms of turnout from the unresponsive nature of its institutional character;²³ but other research has shown (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978; Barnes and Kaase 1979) that the United States is the country (among those for which we have relevant data) in which citizens most frequently turn to non-electoral modes of political participation. This concomitant of low turnout is only speculative, but the hypothesis is highly consonant with the instrumental basis of political action that seems so clear in our findings.

NOTES

¹ In recent years it has become increasingly common to analyze turnout figures that are based on voting age population for all countries. This procedure has a number of disadvantages. First, these figures are not officially validated and are thus subject to greater error. More importantly, voting age population everywhere includes an unknown but variable number of individuals not eligible to vote. It has been estimated that, in the United States, changes in the denominator used in the conventional calculation of turnout have alone been responsible for all of the apparent turnout decline in that country since 1972 (Macdonald and Popkin 2000). The denominator used in the calculation of U.S. turnout for this paper has been corrected for estimated changes in the ineligible portion of the U.S. voting age population (cf. Mackie and Rose 1991, 458).

² U.S. midterm elections do not respond to the same forces as elections elsewhere, since executive power is not at stake, and so they have been excluded. For the Netherlands, the series starts in 1968, after the abolition of compulsory voting.

³ See Katz 1997, Table 13.3. After 1985 several countries held elections under new electoral systems,

adopted weekend voting, or made other changes that would have required us to truncate the series for those countries or include complex interaction terms in our models. Before 1960 there was also a certain lack of stability in regard to these arrangements. The only major changes that occurred during the 1960-85 period was a lowering of the voting age in many countries; but this (contrary to expectations) did not significantly impact turnout (see below).

⁴ The 41 percent increment mentioned above would only apply to those who would not otherwise have completed high school (11 percent of the sample). For 37 percent of the sample there would be no gain, because they already have a college-level education. The remaining half of the population might find its turnout increased by about 30 percent if everyone were college educated -- an overall gain in turnout of 16 percent. Add the 4 percent (one tenth of 40) from those who now do not even have a high school education and turnout in the United States might be raised 20 percent by this stratagem, bringing it to 72 percent -- still 3 percent below Britain's, and 20 percent below the level found in high turnout countries.

⁵ Powell (1986) found significant effects from a variable he termed "group-party linkages" but his data are from the 1960s. By the 1970s such linkages had declined in many countries (Franklin, et al. 1992) and analysis of turnout in the late 1980s found no remaining trace of this effect (van der Eijk, Franklin, et al. 1996, Chapter 19).

⁶ Because the dependent variable in this analysis is a dichotomy (voted or not) many scholars consider regression analysis to be an inappropriate statistical method. Other work with similar variables (but whose case base was restricted to West European countries) did not indicate any way in which researchers would have been misled by relying on OLS regression (van der Eijk, Franklin, et al. 1996, Chapter 19) which, because of the interpretability of its results, is the method employed here.

⁷ To measure the maximum possible effect of national context, 22 dummy variables were included in the analysis whose results are reported in the second and third columns of Table 10.3 – one for each country less one for the base country (the U.S.A. in this instance). These variables will encapsulate differences between countries that go beyond anything that can specifically be measured at the national level, but we will see that in practice we can account for some 95 percent of the variance explained by these variables.

⁸ In the analyses reported in this chapter, data missing on any variable were replaced by mean values of that variable. Dummy variables were then defined that indicated the presence or absence of missing data for the corresponding substantive variable and included in each analysis as recommended by Cohen and Cohen (1983, 275-300). However, only here and in the analysis reported in Table 10.5 did any such missing data indicators prove significant.

⁹ Respondents who fail to disclose their extent of religious participation are 4 percent less likely to vote than those who are willing to disclose this information.

¹⁰ The United States has so many unique features as a democracy that it is difficult to attribute low turnout to one of these features in particular. However, if separated powers are bad for turnout then anything that causes powers to become more separated should result in turnout decline. This is found to be the case when divided government is treated as a phenomenon that accentuates the separation of powers (Franklin and Hirczy de Mino 1998).

¹¹ The Swiss are called to the polls on average seven times a year, mainly to render referendum verdicts (see LeDuc's chapter, this volume). Americans face federal, state, or local elections more than twice a year on average (Boyd 1981, 145), less often than the Swiss, but many times more often than anyone else.

¹² For countries not included in the Mackie and Rose compendium, this value is estimated from the votes/seats ratio for the largest party in the legislature. In the over-time analyses this variable is measured separately at each election.

¹³ If frequent elections are bad for turnout then the length of time since the most recent legislative election may well have the same sort of effect. It is well known that when countries have not held free elections for some time (and especially when they have never previously held a free election) turnout is particularly high. Where an election is preceded by a period without regular elections, the variable is coded as one more than the maximum period of time allowed by law between elections in that country.

¹⁴ A similar line of reasoning led Jackman (1987) and others (Blais and Dobrzynska 1990; Crepaz 1990; Jackman and Miller 1995; Ratcliff 1996) to suppose that the number of parties in a legislature would affect turnout. However, findings from these studies were mixed, and the variable is evidently closely related to the size of the largest party which in our work overrides any effect of the number of parties. Several other variables have been proposed by various authors as likely causes of turnout changes over time, and especially of turnout decline (Powell, 1986; Ratcliff 1992, 1996; Jackman and Miller, 1995; Franklin and Hirczy de Mino 1998; van Egmond, de Graaf, and van der Eijk 1998; Blais and Dobrzynska 1990; Wattenberg 2000). However, these are either variables that would only be appropriate for analysing turnout variations within one country or they have not proved successful in explaining turnout variations in a model as fully specified as the one we employ here (cf. Franklin, Lyons and Marsh 2000).

¹⁵ But see Ayres (1995) and Mitchell and Wlezien (1995) for suggestions that the effects of this variable might have been overstated even in the United States. A study of the effects of "motor voter" and other reforms on turnout in the 1996 US presidential election (Knack 1999) concludes that registration effects are too small (at about 4 percent) to prove significant in a study such as this one,

and in a comparative study similar to ours, Powell and Miller (1995) failed to find any effect of this variable.

¹⁶ Spain and Portugal (which are also included in Model A) did not hold free elections until the late 1970s, and it proved impossible to obtain the necessary statistics for elections held prior to 1958 in Venezuela, 1966 in Brazil, 1967 in India, 1969 in Chile, 1973 in Argentina, or 1974 in Costa Rica.

¹⁷ Countries without automatic voter registration that did have compulsory voting were coded as though registration was automatic.

¹⁸ This is because elections to the European Parliament occur on a fixed cycle, every five years, whereas elections to national parliaments in most European countries occur when they are called, though with a legal limit on the maximum length of time allowed between elections. This means that European elections occur at different times within the national electoral cycles of different countries, and even at different times within successive electoral cycles in the same country.

¹⁹ Note that we do not expect to explain as much variance in an analysis of turnout variations over time as we do in an analysis of turnout variations between countries. In the latter analysis (conducted earlier in this chapter) we average the turnout at successive elections, removing a lot of the variation which, in over-time perspective, does have to be explained.

²⁰ The number of elections for each country varies from 5 to 22. See Footnote 16 for details of countries for which we do not have election data over the full span of years included in this table. In certain Latin American countries we are missing some specific variables for particular elections. Missing data was treated as described in footnote 8.

²¹ This analysis employs Prais-Winsten regression with panel corrected standard errors to provide significance tests that take account of the structure of data (Beck and Katz 1995). It also takes account of the AR(1) process underlying the data (which in Model A is accounted for by the lagged dependent

variable).

²² These models all find significant effects of the missing data indicator for the margin of victory variable, which invariably happens when we do not have information on the size of the second largest party (see footnote 8 for an explanation of this test). This is probably because one reason for failure to report the size of the second largest party would be that it received very few votes – much less than the average for second parties (which is the value assumed when data are missing).

²³ To say it "suffers" from its institutions is to look at things purely from the perspective of electoral turnout. The founding fathers, of course, designed a system that would be unresponsive to the popular will, and their system works pretty much as intended. Our findings suggest that low turnout is an inevitable concomitant.

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FIGURE AND TABLES

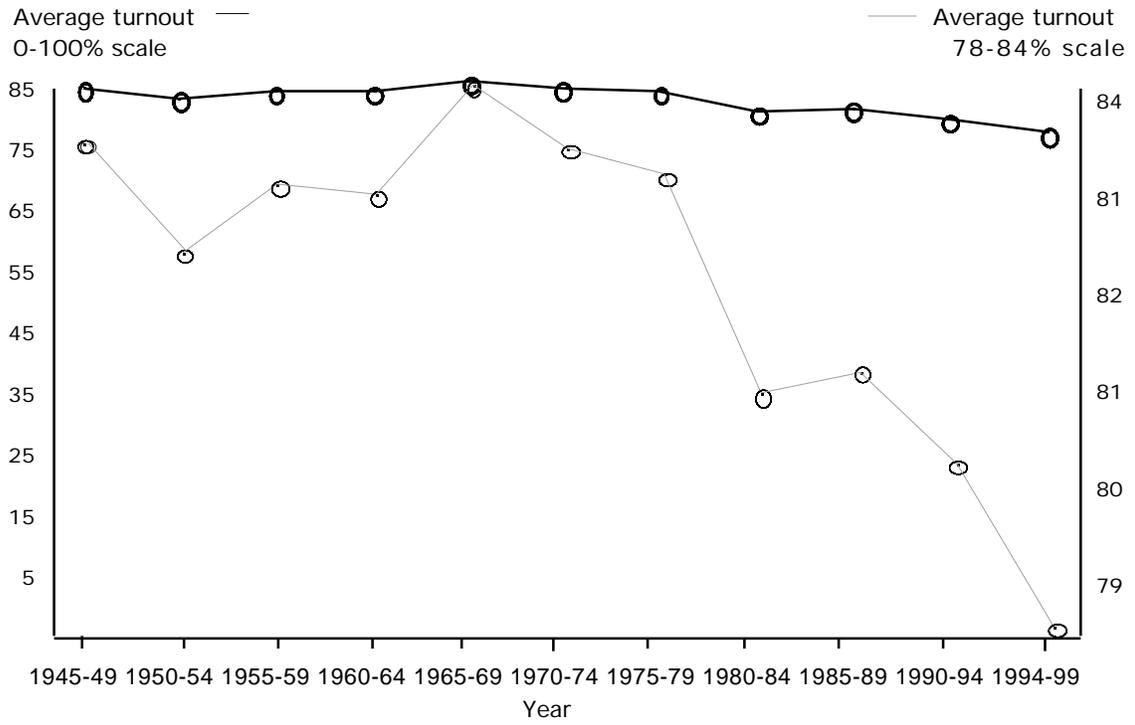


Figure 10.1 Average turnout over five-year periods for 23 countries since 1945

Table 10.1 Average turnout in free elections to the lower house in 40 countries, 1961-1999

| | | | | | |
|--------------------|----|----------------------|----|-----------------|----|
| Australia(16)# | 95 | Greece(11)#* | 82 | Spain(7)#* | 74 |
| Malta(9)# | 94 | Netherlands(9)#* | 82 | Bulgaria(3)* | 73 |
| Belgium(13)#* | 92 | Brazil(9)# | 81 | Ireland(12)#* | 73 |
| Italy(10)#* | 90 | Venezuela(8)# | 81 | Japan(12)# | 69 |
| Austria(11)# | 90 | Norway(10)# | 81 | Estonia(4)* | 68 |
| Iceland(11)#* | 89 | Costa Rica(10)# | 80 | India(10)# | 59 |
| Luxembourg(8)#* | 89 | Israel(11)# | 80 | Russia(3)* | 58 |
| Sweden(12)# | 88 | Latvia(4)* | 79 | Hungary(6)* | 57 |
| New Zealand(12)# | 87 | Portugal(10)#* | 77 | Switzerland(9)# | 52 |
| Denmark(15)#* | 86 | Romania(2)* | 76 | USA(9)#* | 52 |
| Germany(11)#* | 86 | Finland(11)# | 76 | Poland(4)* | 51 |
| Argentina(13)# | 83 | Canada(12)# | 75 | Lithuania(2)* | 50 |
| Czech Republic(4)* | 83 | United Kingdom(10)#* | 75 | | |
| Chile(7)# | 83 | France(10)#* | 75 | | |

Included in country-level dataset (31 countries).

* Included in individual-level dataset (23 countries).

Sources: Mackie and Rose (1992); Katz (1997); *Electoral Studies* (Vol 5-19).

Notes: U.S. presidential election years only, Dutch elections only from 1968, elsewhere from 1945 or the earliest democratic elections. The number of elections included in each average is in parentheses.

Table 10.2 Average turnout for different groups of individuals in 23 countries

| Variable (# of categories) | <u>Average turnout in group with</u> | | <u>Variance explained by</u> | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| | Lowest turnout | Highest turnout | Individual effects | Country effects |
| Age (5) | 58.8% | 88.9% | 6.3% | 9.9% |
| Political discussion(2) | 69.7 | 83.1 | 2.1 | 9.9 |
| Party identification(4) | 70.1 | 89.2 | 1.6 | 9.9 |
| Religious participation(3) | 76.3 | 83.0 | 0.7 | 9.9 |
| Education(2) | 73.8 | 86.1 | 0.6 | 9.9 |
| Union membership(2) | 76.8 | 81.6 | 0.3 | 9.9 |
| Income (5) | 75.4 | 89.2 | 0.3 | 9.9 |
| N | 21,601 | 21,601 | 21,601 | 21,601 |

Source: Eurobarometer 41a; U.S. National Election Study 1988; East European Barometer 2.

Note: Countries included in this table are marked * in Table 10.1.

Table 10.3 Effects on individual-level electoral participation in 23 countries

| Variable (# of categories) | b | (s.e.) | b | (s.e.) | b | (s.e.) |
|--------------------------------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|
| Constant | .636 | (.017)* | .065 | (.022) | .069 | (.022) |
| Age (5) | .064 | (.002)* | .063 | (.002)* | .062 | (.002)* |
| Political discussion (2) | .097 | (.006)* | .091 | (.006)* | .093 | (.006)* |
| Strength of party identification (4) | .010 | (.004) | .040 | (.004)* | .039 | (.004)* |
| Religious participation (3) | .008 | (.004) | .024 | (.005)* | .030 | (.004)* |
| Education (2) | .005 | (.003) | .025 | (.003)* | .025 | (.003)* |
| Union member (2) | -.081 | (.006)* | -.023 | (.006)* | -.024 | (.006)* |
| Income (standardized) | .001 | (.001) | .004 | (.009)* | .004 | (.001)* |
| Average country effect (proportion) | | | .478 | (.017)* | .489 | (.017)* |
| Missing religious participation (2) | | | | | -.041 | (.009)* |
| Adjusted R ² | .055 | | .195 | | .195 | |
| N | 21,601 | | 21,601 | | 21,601 | |

* Significant at p<.001.

Source: See Table 10.2.

Note: Countries included in this table are marked * in Table 10.1.

Table 10.4 Three models explaining turnout in 25-31 countries, 1960-1985

| Variable (range of values) | <u>Model A</u> | | <u>Model B</u> | | <u>Model C</u> | |
|------------------------------|----------------|----------|----------------|----------|--------------------|----------|
| | Mackie-Rose | | 31 countries | | No Switz or U.S.A. | |
| | b | (s.e.) | b | (s.e.) | b | (s.e.) |
| Constant | 61.07 | (5.57)** | 62.80 | (4.54)** | 88.11 | (5.18)** |
| Majority status (3-26%) | -0.21 | (0.09)* | -0.23 | (0.10)* | -0.16 | (0.10)* |
| Margin of victory (2-23%) | -0.26 | (0.13)* | -0.33 | (0.12)** | -0.22 | (0.13)* |
| Time since last electn (2-5) | -1.41 | (1.11) | -1.85 | (0.95)* | -0.98 | (1.08) |
| Disproportionality (0-20%) | -0.57 | (0.13)** | -0.51 | (0.13)** | -0.50 | (0.13)** |
| Compulsory voting (0,1) | 7.36 | (1.93)** | 5.56 | (1.51)** | 7.15 | (1.82)** |
| Postal voting (0,1) | 6.08 | (1.41)** | 5.29 | (1.45)** | 5.81 | (1.34)** |
| Weekend voting (0,1) | 5.60 | (1.75)** | 6.81 | (1.47)** | 6.06 | (1.67)** |
| Size of electorate (million) | -0.03 | (0.03) | -0.04 | (0.13)** | -0.08 | (0.04)* |
| Electoral salience (0,1) | 29.56 | (3.18)** | 29.54 | (2.98)** | | |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.949 | | 0.929 | | 0.897 | |
| N | 25 | | 31 | | 29 | |

* p<0.05, one tailed; ** P<0.01, one tailed.

Source: Analysis of data from Mackie and Rose (1992); Katz (1997); *Electoral Studies* (Vol 5-19).

Note: Countries included in this analysis are marked # in Table 10.1.

Table 10.5 Two models explaining turnout variations in 31 countries, 1945-1999

| Variable | <u>Model A</u> | | <u>Model B</u> | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|----------|
| | Over time model | | Panel corrected | |
| | b | (s.e.) | b | (s.e.) |
| Constant | 25.06 | (3.93)** | 52.63 | (2.14)** |
| Majority status (0-50%) | -0.13 | (0.04)** | -0.16 | (0.04)** |
| Margin of victory (0-70%) | -0.06 | (0.04)* | -0.08 | (0.03)** |
| Time since last election (0.6 - 5) | 0.52 | (0.18)** | 0.37 | (0.14)** |
| Disproportionality (1-20) | -0.01 | (0.04) | -0.06 | (0.04) |
| Compulsory voting (0,1) | 5.99 | (1.99)** | 10.92 | (0.76)** |
| Postal voting (0,1) | 4.07 | (1.96)** | 6.79 | (0.84)** |
| Weekend voting (0,1) | -1.57 | (0.89) | -0.26 | (0.54) |
| Size of electorate (million) | -0.01 | (0.01) | -0.04 | (0.01)** |
| Electoral salience (0,1) | (dropped) | | 25.46 | (2.06)** |
| Turnout _{t-1} | 0.66 | (0.04)** | (dropped) | |
| Missing margin (0,1) | -5.59 | (1.66)** | -5.89 | (1.58)** |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.506 | | 0.709 | |
| N | 403 | | 436 | |

* p<0.05, one tailed; ** p<0.01, one tailed.

Source: Mackie and Rose (1991); Electoral Studies (Vol 5-19); Katz (1997, Table 13.3).

Note: Countries included in this table are marked # in Table 10.1.