

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 rather greater commitment by rather more people, but over a shorter period. Voting requires a minimum commitment for a brief period, but involves the greatest number of people. In a book 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, and this will be our primary concern. However, low turnout may, as we shall see, be associated with the widespread use of alternative avenues for participatory activities; so those alternatives are not irrelevant even when we take a perspective that is primarily electoral.

This chapter starts by examining variations in voting turnout by country and by various social characteristics. In seeking to explain these variations we consider three theories that have dominated research in this area ever since the start of behavioral political studies - one based on individual resources, one based on political mobilization, and the third 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 electoral turnout. The salience of elections, the use of compulsory voting, a highly proportional electoral system, postal voting, and weekend polling provide the most plausible explanations of cross-national differences in voting turnout because these influence the costs and benefits of casting a ballot.

The last section of the chapter considers cross-national variations in other types of political participation, and the implications of these variations for democracy and democratization.

Turnout in Democracies

We can start by comparing turnout in 38 democracies.¹ Table 8.1 shows average turnout in these countries at free elections for the lower house conducted between 1960 and 1995, along with the number of elections upon which each average is based.² Countries marked with # in this table are countries for which systemic characteristics have been compiled by Katz (1996). These countries are used in the country-level analyses reported later in this chapter.³ Countries flagged with * in this table are countries for which we have obtained survey data from the early 1990s.⁴ These countries are used in the individual-level analyses reported later in this chapter. The two 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.

When we turn to other types of participation, these are compared on

¹ These are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Roumania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States and Venezuela. These are the only countries for which adequate information could readily be obtained for use in the analyses conducted in this chapter - see notes to Table 8.1.

² This number may be less than the total number of elections actually conducted in certain countries, due to missing data. Countries of Eastern Europe did not have free elections before 1989, so for them the table contains average turnout for elections held during the 1990s. For the U.S., only 'on year' congressional elections are included (i.e. elections held in conjunction with presidential elections). U.S. midterm elections do not respond to the same forces as elections elsewhere, since executive power is not at stake. For the Netherlands, the series starts in 1968, after the abolition of compulsory voting there.

³ Since the systemic characteristics are available only for the period 1960-1985, turnout in the country-level analyses is also restricted to this period (see Katz 1996: Table 13.3).

⁴ See notes to Table 8.2.

the basis of studies conducted in seven countries by Verba, Nie and Kim (1978), in five countries by Barnes, Kaase, et al. (1979), in Western Europe by Fuchs and Klingemann (1995), and in the United States by Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) and by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995).

Who participates?

Tables 8.1 and 8.2 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

Table 8.1 Average turnout in free elections to the lower house in 37 countries, 1960-1995**

Australia(14)#	95	Malta(6)#	94	Romania(1)*	93
Austria(9)#	92	Belgium(12)#*	91	Italy(9)#*	90
Iceland(10)#*	89	Luxembourg(7)#*	90	Venezuela(7)#	85
Bulgaria(2)*	80	New Zealand(12)#	88	Denmark(14)#*	87
Germany(9)#*	86	Sweden(13)#	87	Greece(11)#*	86
Lithuania(1)*	86	Latvia(1)*	86	Czech Republic(2)*	85
Brazil(3)#	83	Netherlands(7)#*	83	Costa Rica(8)#	81
Israel(9)#	80	Norway(9)#	81	Finland(10)#	78
Portugal(9)#*	79	Canada(11)#	76	France(9)#*	76
United Kingdom(9)#*	75	Estonia(2)*	69	Ireland(11)#*	74
Spain(6)#*	73	Japan(12)#	71	Hungary(2)*	66
Russia(2)*	61	India(6)#	58	USA(9)#*	54
Switzerland(8)#	54	Poland(2)*	51		

Sources: Mackie and Rose (1992); Katz (1996); *Electoral Studies* (Vol 5-14).

Notes: Excluding all U.S. midterm elections, and Dutch elections before 1968.

Parenthasized are the number of elections included in each average.

Included in country-level dataset (29 countries).

* Included in individual-level dataset (22 countries).

things matter nearly as much as whether one is an Australian or an American. Five countries show turnout averaging over 90 percent (one shows turnout of 95 percent), while four show turnout averaging under 60 percent (one shows turnout of 51 percent) - an average difference across these nine countries of nearly 40 percent. No difference in turnout levels across categories of individuals averages more than two-thirds that. The strongest individual-level effect that might be subject to manipulation - political discussion - averages only 13 percent (83.1 less 69.7 in Table 8.2). Individual-level differences are very similar across Eastern and Western Europe, though rather 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. But only the first of these differences even comes close to matching the difference between the United States and the high-turnout countries.

Table 8.2 Turnout for different groups of individuals in 22 countries**

Variable	Turnout in group with		Variance explained by	
	Lowest	highest	Individual effects	Country effects
Age (in 5 categories)	58.8%	88.9%	6.3%	9.9%
Political discussion#	69.7	83.1	2.1	9.9
Party identification###	70.1	89.2	1.6	9.9
Religious participation##	76.3	83.0	0.7	9.9
Education#	73.8	86.1	0.6	9.9
Union membership#	76.8	81.6	0.3	9.9
Income (in 5 categories)	75.4	89.2	0.3	9.9
N	21,601	21,601	21,601	21,601

** Marked * in Table 8.1 # Two categories ## Three categories ### Four categories
 Source: Analysis of Eurobarometer 41a; U.S. National Election Study, 1988; East European Barometer 2.

To make it clear that within-country effects never approach between-country effects, the final columns of Table 8.2 compare the variance explained by individual 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 suggests that if one wants to increase electoral participation in a low-turnout country, the answer lies not in increasing levels of education or political interest 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.⁵ 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

⁵ 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 74 percent - still 4 percent below Britain's, and 20 percent below the level found in high turnout countries.

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.⁶

Of these, the resource theory of political participation has been most widely studied. According to this theory, people participate who have the time and money to do so. The classic formulation of this approach was by Verba and Nie (1972) who proposed what they called a 'baseline model' of political participation which generated an expected level of participation from education, income and occupational variables.⁷ This baseline produced expectations which

⁶ Essentially the instrumental approach views voters as social beings who see their vote not individually but as one of many. No individual vote of course has much chance of affecting the course of political events, but voters can take satisfaction in affirming their solidarity with others who feel the same way, knowing that together they might be able to affect the course of events (cf. Hirczy, 1992).

⁷ Variations on this approach characterize much of the work on political participation. See in particular Milbrath and Goel (1977); Verba, Nie and Kim (1978); Barnes and Kaase (1979); Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980); Parry, Moiser and Day (1990); Teixeira (1992); Rosenstone and Hansen (1993); Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995).

might be modified by other individual characteristics, but generally not by much. 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 political parties) has recently gained prominence in studies of political participation (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995).⁸ 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 countries for which we have measured these effects (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.⁹

⁸ This approach does, however, have a long pedigree. For earlier examples see Huckfeldt (1979, 1986); Giles and Dantico (1982); Leighley (1990); Kenny (1992).

⁹ Powell (1986) found significant effects from a variable he termed 'group-party linkages' but his data came from the 1960s. By the 1970s such linkages have 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). Other work has shown that the declining importance of group-party linkages can explain some part of the decline in turnout in European countries since the 1960s (Franklin, van der Eijk and Oppenhuis 1995; but see Topf 1995 for evidence that this decline was from a historically high point in electoral turnout). In the analyses conducted for Table 18.4 (in which turnout is

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 leads them to feel politically efficacious will vote because they are motivated to do so; and those who are mobilized to vote are evidently motivated as a consequence of involvement and persuasion (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, 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; van der Eijk, Franklin and Marsh, 1996). 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

averaged for the period 1960 to 1985) we do find (barely) significant effects of group-party linkage across those countries for which the extent of this linkage can be measured - the countries of the (then) European Community. Fuchs and Klingemann (1995) also find significant effects from a similar variable (which they call 'political linkage') over the same countries in a slightly later period. However, the extent of missing data costs the relationship significance even in the smallest subset of countries employed in Table 18.4.

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 policies are in any case subject to referendum) will probably see lower turnout than a country like Malta, where every important political decision is going to be affected by 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 political participation is superior to the other two common approaches because it subsumes them both, while explaining additional aspects of political participation 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 how important elections seem to voters but also in 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 been merely 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 the 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-two countries (those of Western and Eastern Europe, together with the United States), relatively few variables are available that are relevant to electoral mobilization - only strength of party identification might be construed as a variable 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 virtually all those ever suggested in past research (cf. van der Eijk, Franklin et al., 1996; Oppenhuis, 1995).

Table 8.3 Effects on individual-level electoral participation in 22 countries**

Variable	b	(s.e.)	b	(s.e.)	b	(s.e.)
Constant	.636	(.017)*	.065	(.022)	.069	(.022)
Age (in 5 categories)	.064	(.002)*	.063	(.002)*	.062	(.002)*
Political discussion#	.097	(.006)*	.091	(.006)*	.093	(.006)*
Strength of party id###	.010	(.004)	.040	(.004)*	.039	(.004)*
Religious participation##	.008	(.004)	.024	(.005)*	.030	(.004)*
Education#	.005	(.003)	.025	(.003)*	.025	(.003)*
Union member#	-.081	(.006)*	-.023	(.006)*	-.024	(.006)*
Income (standardized)	.001	(.001)	.004	(.009)*	.004	(.001)*
Average country effect#			.478	(.017)*	.489	(.017)*
Missing religious participation					-.041	(.009)*
R ²	.055		.196		.196	
(Adjusted R ²)	(.055)		(.195)		(.195)	
N	21,601		21,601		21,601	

** Marked * in Table 8.1.

* significant at p<.001. # Two categories ## Three categories ### Four categories
Source: As for Table 8.2.

Table 8.3 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,¹⁰ the second where these

¹⁰ Because the dependent variable in this analysis is a dichotomy (voted or not) many scholars consider regression analysis to be an inappropriate statistical method. In other work with identical variables (but whose case base was restricted to West European countries) logistic regression effects were calculated along with the OLS regression effects shown here (van der Eijk, Franklin, et al., 1996: Chapter 19). That analysis did not indicate any way in which researchers would

effects are considered within their national contexts,¹¹ and the third where missing data indicators are taken into account.¹² As can be seen, individual-level characteristics explain only 5.2 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.¹³ Effects (b) of the various variables included in the table are readily interpretable. The important finding is the extent to which national context exceeds in importance the effects of individual-level variables.¹⁴ This is shown

have been misled by relying on OLS regression which, because of the interpretability of its results, is the method employed here.

¹¹ To measure the maximum possible effect of national context, 21 dummy variables were included in the analysis whose results are reported in the second column of Table 2 – 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 90 percent of the variance explained by these variables. By employing country dummies at this point in our investigations we avoid the need to specify the variables we will use to explain country differences, which are introduced in the next section. We are also able to employ all the countries for which we have individual-level data, regardless of the fact that for some of them we do not have corresponding aggregate-level data (see below).

¹² In the analyses reported in this chapter, data missing on any variable have been 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, as recommended by Cohen and Cohen (1983:275-300). In all analyses these dummy variables were included along with the corresponding substantive variables. However, this is the only analysis where any such missing data indicators proved significant.

¹³ 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. The same was found over Western European countries taken alone. See van der Eijk, Franklin, et al. (1996: Chapter 19) for a discussion of this point.

¹⁴ Note that 'national context,' as used in this chapter, excludes social context variables. If education (for example) had proved to have large individual-level

not only in terms of variance explained but also in the magnitude 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. In these two countries public policy outputs evidently rest on many imponderables apart from 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. 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

effects, some of these effects might properly have been attributed to the country level if people were more educated in some countries than in others. In this chapter we ascribe all such effects to the individual level in order to give that level the greatest chance of showing its importance. Other research (van der Eijk, Franklin et al. 1996) has found no discernible effects from social context, at least in countries of the European Union. More highly educated populations or wealthier populations, for example, are not more likely to show high turnout.

outcomes and government complexion are the same two countries (the United States and Switzerland) that have the largest number by far of electoral contests.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

Another variable already proposed as contributing to the benefits of voting is the proportionality of the electoral system. 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 proportionality according to the votes/seats ratio (calculated over all parties in each country) observed in the last election held in each country during the 1980s (data from Mackie and Rose 1991).

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 and some Latin American countries)

¹⁵ The Swiss are called to the polls on average seven times a year, mainly to render referendum verdicts (see Chapter 1, Table 1.2). 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.

¹⁶ Finding that this variable has significant effects will not of course validate our assumption about its substantive meaning. That requires other analysis (see below).

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. 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).¹⁷ Whether the election occurs on a weekend or working day will 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), 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. Finally, the number of days the polls are open might be thought to increase the opportunity to vote - except that it is also possible that having the polls open for more than a day will only happen in countries where there is some reason to suppose that the population will find it hard to get to the polls.¹⁸ In that case, it is an empirical question whether the additional days the polls are open actually compensate for the additional difficulties of voting in such countries.

¹⁷ 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. Hirczy (1992) suggests that its effects might actually be nil, based on comparison of North Dakota (which has no registration requirement) and adjacent states (cf. Erikson, 1989).

¹⁸ For example, in large countries with widely-separated polling places. In fact, not all large countries have multiple days of voting; but it is plausible to assume that even large countries vary in the difficulty found in getting to the polls. The suggestion here is that multiple polling days may serve as an indicator of otherwise unmeasured difficulties in achieving adequate turnout, whatever the reason for those difficulties.

Effects of country differences on turnout

Across the 29 countries for which we have adequate data (this analysis excludes East European countries because of a lack of relevant electoral contests), the country characteristics we have posited as being important prove somewhat sensitive to precisely which countries are included.¹⁹ This can be seen in Table 8.4, which displays the findings from three different analyses. The first focuses on the 25 countries included in

Table 8.4 Three models explaining turnout in 29 countries**

Variable	Mackie-Rose		29 countries		No Switz or U.S.	
	b	(s.e.)	b	(s.e.)	b	(s.e.)
Constant	21.94	(14.78)	26.46	(13.53)*	26.26	(13.82)*
Proportionality###	0.62	(0.15)*	0.59	(0.15)*	0.60	(0.15)*
Compulsory voting#	7.29	(2.12)*	7.30	(1.74)*	7.34	(1.78)*
Postal voting#	4.06	(1.99)*	4.43	(1.74)*	4.42	(1.78)*
Sunday voting#	5.29	(1.20)*	6.48	(1.74)*	6.32	(1.84)*
N of polling days##	-1.86	(2.43)	-5.02	(1.02)*	-5.04	(1.05)*
Electoral salience#	-28.19	(3.24)*	-26.93	(3.02)*		
R ²	0.899		0.907		0.836	
(adjusted R ²)	(0.866)		(0.881)		(0.797)	
N	25		29		27	

** Marked # in Table 8.1.

* p<0.5. # Two categories. ## 1-5 days. ### 79-99 percent.

Source: Analysis of data from Mackie and Rose (1991); Katz (1996: Table 13.3).

The first two models explain a highly respectable 90 percent of variance in turnout, but the number of polling days only proves significant in the second of these two models. Five other variables are significant in both models. Of these, by far the most potent is

¹⁹ Including East European countries would greatly increase this sensitivity because of the noise introduced by ideocyncratic factors which cannot be averaged out over a short sequence of elections.

electoral salience. Salient elections give rise to some 27 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., 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 there, but the remaining coefficients are little changed; and variance explained remains high at 84 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, 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 7 percent in countries that make voting obligatory. Postal voting is worth about 4 percent. Proportionality is worth about six tenths of a percentage point in turnout for every percent by which the distribution of seats in the legislature approaches proportionality with the distribution of votes. Since 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 0.6) translates into a difference of about 12 percent in turnout. Sunday voting is worth 5-6 percent; and the effect of keeping polls open, in the second and third models, is actually negative - suggesting that countries where people have difficulty getting to the polls (such as India, Norway and Finland) do not adequately compensate by means of additional polling days for the difficulties that lead such countries to extend their elections in

this way.²⁰ In India, which keeps its polls open four days more than normal, this corresponds to a turnout that is 20 percent lower than in countries with only a single day of polling. No other country has polls open more than two days.²¹

On the basis of these findings we can assert (as we have in other work, see van der Eijk, Franklin, et al., 1996) that there are different routes to high turnout. Electoral salience is most important, but 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.

One proposed variable did not yield significant effects in any of the analyses. Voluntary voter registration does not seem to reduce turnout when other effects are controlled.²² This finding may come as

²⁰ The number of polling days has to meet a more stringent requirement for significance than other variables because we were prepared to accept either a positive or a negative relationship in the case of this variable. Thus the appropriate test is two-tailed, unlike the tests for other variables in the table.

²¹ The finding regarding polling days is essentially driven by India. Excluding it (or including a dummy variable that picks out that one country) leaves polling days insignificant, as in Model 1. Substantively it makes no difference which course is taken, since we do not know why Indians find it harder than others to go to the polls. If India is omitted from the analysis, we explain 89.5 percent of variance in turnout, with all effects but that of polling days retaining virtually the same values and remaining highly significant. Indeed, if we had sufficient contextual information we might be able to code India as a 'low electoral salience' country, along with Switzerland and the United States - removing the need for special treatment. Doing so leaves all coefficients except for polling days virtually the same as in the second model in Table 8.4, with variance explained of 90.5 percent.

²² Countries without automatic voter registration that did have compulsory voting were coded as though registration was automatic. If this was not done, the effect of the variable proved significant and negative. That is, countries with automatic voter registration saw lower turnout than countries with voluntary registration if

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 the research design we have adopted 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 17).

Effects of the nature of the electoral contest on turnout

We have pointed out that the most powerful influence reported in Table 8.4 has not been unambiguously identified. Switzerland and the United States may indeed be low turnout countries because of low electoral salience. But there might be other reasons for the poor turnout in those countries.²³ One way to validate our assumption about the cen-

voluntarism was not deemed to be vitiated by a legal requirement to vote.

²³ It can be argued that our use of legislative elections treats U.S. turnout unfairly, since congressional elections are of course less salient than Presidential elections there. However, even at Presidential elections turnout in the United States averages less than 58 percent. So, even had we employed presidential voting, the U.S. would still have been one of the three countries in our data with lowest turnout. Another problem with treating U.S. elections as low salience elections arises from the fact that in the Nineteenth Century turnout was much higher - yet presumably elections had no greater salience then. In fact, even in the Nineteenth Century turnout was no higher than the level found today in medium turnout countries, leaving plenty of room for low salience to have played a role - especially since one reason generally given for the higher turnout prior to wideranging reforms, conducted around the turn of the century, was the prevalence of electoral fraud (Converse 1974; Rusk 1974; but see Burnham 1965).

trality 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 election 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 and Franklin, 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.

Careful 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: 301-302). 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 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 real elections. The additional salience of these elections in such circum-

stances 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 (cf. Franklin, Niemi and Whitten, 1994).

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. Table 8.5 shows that European elections held at the start of the electoral cycle (as much as 5 years before the next national elections in some countries) turnout will be 18 percent lower (30 percent of 60 months) than turnout in European elections held on the same day as national elections (such a conjunction occurred in three countries in 1989). 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 possible alternative explanations.²⁴

²⁴ The effect of electoral salience on turnout in countries of the European Union appears to be less (at 18 percent) than the 27 percent measured in a wider universe. The effect of compulsory voting is also greater than in that wider universe. The differences are partly attributable to the different countries employed in the two analyses, and partly to the fact that Table 4 contains a more fully specified model than Table 5. Note that, in Table 5, an analysis conducted at the individual level yields findings that are identical (to within rounding error) with those found in an analysis conducted at the aggregate level. Moreover, the variance explained at the individual level is very similar to the additional variance explained by country differences in Table 18.3. See van der Eijk, Franklin, et al. (1996: Chapter 19) for further discussion of these points.

Table 8.5 Regression of Electoral Participation on Systemic Characteristics in an EU-wide Analysis of the 1989 Elections**

Independent Variables	Aggregate level b	Individual level b
<u>Systemic</u>		
Compulsory voting	26.08	0.264
Sunday voting	9.35	0.093
Proportionality of electoral system	0.46	0.005
<u>Political</u>		
Electoral salience*	-0.30	-0.003
(Constant)	17.77	0.180
R ²	0.918	0.142
N	14.**	10,500

Source: Adapted from van der Eijk, Franklin et al. (1996):318. The source does not give standard errors.

* Time until next national election in months, Coded 0 in the case of concurrent national elections.

** Twelve countries of the (then) EC, distinguishing Britain and Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, and Flanders and Wallonia within Belgium.

Other types of political participation

When it comes to forms of political participation other than voting and party membership, differences between countries are again generally found to be greater than differences between social categories of voters, though the disparity is not as notable as in the case of voting (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978: 57-62; Barnes and Kaase, 1979: 541-542).²⁵ Moreover, the same studies show that the United States, in contrast to its relative position as lowest in voting

²⁵ Barnes and Kaase studied political participation in Austria, Britain, Germany, Netherlands and the United States. Verba, Nie and Kim focussed on Austria, India, Japan, Netherlands, Nigeria, the United States, and Yugoslavia.

turnout, is highest of all countries investigated in these volumes in terms of other forms of conventional political participation - particularly being active in community problem-solving organizations, and contacting officials about community and other social problems (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978: 58).

Another marked difference between voting and other forms of participation is that (except in the United States) whether people vote is hardly at all affected by their socioeconomic status (and hence the resources they bring to the political world). By contrast, other forms of participation are strongly affected by socioeconomic resources in all countries - some to an even greater extent than in the United States (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978: 419-431). With our new perspective on the importance of contextual factors in turnout, we can shed light both on the different role of SES in the United States than elsewhere, and on the different role of SES for different modes of participation.

Where turnout is virtually perfect there is little room for individual-level factors to play a part (and it is notable that in the Verba, Nie and Kim tables, SES plays least part in explaining turnout in Austria and the Netherlands - the two countries with highest turnout out of the seven they investigate). By contrast, where turnout is low there is space for other factors to play a role, as resources do in determining turnout in the United States (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978: 122-123). The point about other forms of participation is that in no country does everyone work for a party or everyone contact government officials. These and other non-voting activities are unevenly spread across the population, so there is room for individual characteristics to play a role in determining who participates and who does not. In such circumstances differences in resources and the mobilizing efforts of parties and other political players can play a role unattenuated by systemic effects (cf. Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978:6-7; Verba, Schlozman

and Brady, 1995:358).

The fact that Americans participate more than other nations in non-voting activities has an additional implication. Evidently Americans are not apathetic when it comes to politics. When we consider acts that citizens of other countries find difficult or unrewarding, Americans perform those acts in large numbers. In general, among countries for which we have relevant data, there appears to be a slight but significant inverse relationship between electoral and other forms of political participation, with low turnout democratic countries showing greater participation of other types than high turnout countries. Unfortunately, we do not have data for Switzerland on political participation other than voting - data which would provide a critical test of this tendency. For the moment the hypothesis rests largely on contrasting one idiosyncratic country (the United States) with all others. Nevertheless, even in terms of an untested hypothesis, the relationship still is worth elaborating upon. One reason for such an apparent inverse relationship between turnout and other kinds of political participation might be the fact that people who have exhausted themselves in other participatory acts do not have energy left for voting, but this seems unlikely - particularly since Verba and Nie (1972) showed that those who participate in other ways are likely also to be voters.

A much more likely reason for the relationship would provide indirect confirmation of our assumption that low turnout in the United States is partly due to the perceived lack of connection in that country between election outcomes and public policy. People who wish to determine the course of public policy may find the electoral route particularly unrewarding in the United States and Switzerland, and hence be more inclined than in other countries to employ supplementary measures.

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 carrots of weekend polling and 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 not be wasted (encapsulated by the proportionality of the electoral system) - could only operate if people were motivated to use their votes to achieve a political goal.

A country with low salience elections and an electoral system that was not very proportional could easily show turnout levels 40 percent below a country with high salience elections and a highly proportional electoral system. Such differences arise purely from differences in the institutional 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.²⁶ Voters are not fools, and an unresponsive system will motivate many fewer of them to vote.

The fact that voters are not fools is also suggested by the extent

²⁶ Again it must be stressed that our attribution of responsiveness (or lack thereof) to Switzerland and the United States drives over half of this effect. Effects of electoral salience are lower in countries of the European Union, where they can be measured without the need for heroic assumptions. But even if we take the estimate generated from Table 5, of effects reaching 18 percent from electoral salience (when added to the maximum effect of proportionality) we still get total effects of some 35 percent attributable to institutional variations that impact government responsiveness to electoral behavior.

to which they by-pass electoral routes where those routes prove unresponsive. The United States suffers much from the unresponsive nature of its institutional character;²⁷ but 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 no more than hypothesized on the basis of analyses reported in this chapter, but the hypothesis is highly consonant with the instrumental basis of political action that seems so clear in our findings.

²⁷ 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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