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IT'S ABOUT THE BENEFITS

Choice Environments, Ideological Proximity and Individual Participation in 28 Democracies

David Brockington

ABSTRACT

This article approaches the question of turnout by focusing on the benefits term in the classic equation through an examination of the relationship between the quality of the choice environment, ideological proximity and participation in 28 democracies. Using data from the CSES (Comparative Study of Electoral Systems), I find that electoral contexts that feature choice-rich environments, measured both at the individual level by ideological proximity and the contextual level by the coverage of the ideological continuum, are associated with a higher probability that any single voter will participate in an election. These findings hold in the presence of individual and institutional controls, and are confirmed using both robust standard errors and against estimated variance in individual over-reporting of turnout.

KEY WORDS ■ contextual effects ■ CSES ■ ideological competition ■ turnout

Introduction

Among Western democracies, participation in elections has been in steady decline for the past 50 years. In a study of 24 countries, Dalton finds this decline to have occurred in nearly all of the cases studied, with average levels of turnout cases to have dropped from 82 percent to 76 percent (1996). Lijphart (1997) reports a larger decline. The practical ramifications of this decline have been cause for some debate among empiricists and normative theorists. Bennett and Resnick find limited cause for alarm regarding the fate of democracy, but warn that 'a large number of nonvoters means officials will be disproportionately in thrall to intense issue activists' (1990: 800).

However, recent findings from the United States suggest that turnout does matter in certain contexts. Within Congressional districts in the United States,

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Federal resources tend to be allocated strategically by members of the House to precincts that have higher levels of turnout within their respective districts (Martin, 2003); that minority populations are descriptively underrepresented in cities where turnout is relatively low in municipal elections (Hajnal and Trounstein, 2005); and that the preferences of voters are found to be predictive of roll-call voting patterns of United States Senators, while those of non-voters have no relationship with the votes of Senators (Griffin and Newman, 2005).

Considering the consistent and widespread nature of the decline in turnout combined with empirical evidence that suggests patterns of representation and governance vary as turnout varies, the problem of political participation has moved from a mere 'fascinating intellectual puzzle' to what some scholars consider a more serious 'near-crisis situation' (Niemi and Weisberg, 2001: 22).¹

Review the classic equation of turnout: $\text{Vote} = P \times B + D > C$, where 'Vote' represents turnout, P the probability that the single vote offered by a potential voter is decisive, B the potential benefits of the preferred candidate winning, D the all-inclusive 'citizen duty' term and C the costs associated with voting. Within this framework of the rational choice model of participation originally articulated by Downs (1957), the response of scholars has largely focused on the cost side of the equation. Indeed, the paradox presented by several scholars (e.g. Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980) focuses on how lowered legal barriers and rising education rates in the United States should predict higher levels of turnout based on reducing the costs of voting. The participation literature is currently focused on the costs of voting in several contexts. Institutional variation in legal barriers to participation through registration laws (Karp and Banducci, 2001; Powell, 1986; Southwell and Burchett, 2000) and electoral rules (e.g. Blais and Carty, 1990; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Cox, 1999; Jackman and Miller, 1995; Lijphart, 1999) demonstrate how variation in the rules of the game serve to increase or decrease the costs of participation. Mobilization is becoming better understood as a means of reducing the costs of voting through direct contact (Gerber and Green, 2000; Karp et al., 2008; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993) and indirectly reducing costs by 'subsidizing' through increased levels of information, even issue-relevant negative advertising (Kahn and Kenney, 1999).

Attention has shifted away from a consideration of the perceived benefits of voting, however, largely through the consensus that voters do not overestimate the value of their single vote in electoral contexts featuring greater competitiveness (Green and Shapiro, 1994). Since the classic specification of the calculus of voting considers the perceived benefits of voting as interactively dependent on the probability that the single vote of a given individual will make a difference, limiting the value of the latter necessarily renders the former moot.

Studies that concentrate on costs might miss the larger issue. While the value of studies that associate institutional structures like proportional representation (PR) with higher levels of participation is not to be denied,

we ought not ignore that turnout in these democracies is also in general decline. Useful here is a reassessment of the benefit term in the equation. Recent evidence suggests that the *P* variable and the *B* variable be treated as *additive*, rather than *multiplicative*, as performing better in empirical analyses than the multiplicative specification of the equation (Blais, 2000: 74). This is theoretically and logically important. In the classic specification of the calculus model, the *P* and *B* terms are essentially the same variable, as in a multiplicative form it measures *expected* benefit as a single concept contingent on the probabilistic nature of *P*. Hence, if a majority of voters do not overestimate the probability that their single vote will be decisive (Blais, 2000; Green and Shapiro, 1994), then the relative substantive effect of both the *P* and *B* term will be muted, thus leading to an overemphasis on the cost term in the equation in research.²

If we uncouple the benefit term from its interactivity with the probability of casting the deciding vote, what are the possible benefits? It is accepted that some voters cast a sincere vote, potentially more prevalent in PR/multiparty systems, even when these parties either stand no chance of winning a given seat or, if they can jump that hurdle, still have no chance of affecting the outcomes of government.³ In the main, however, people vote to affect policy outcomes of government. In other words, they vote to win. Representation is not an end, but a means to influence the outputs of government. Franklin refers to this as 'executive responsiveness' and considers it a variable of 'major importance in explaining both differences in turnout between countries and changes in turnout over time' (2004: 92).⁴ Depending on the electoral system, this can be achieved through several methods, e.g. a small party that is critical to the formation of a coalition, but the ultimate goal remains control over the levers of power. Thus, when discussing ideological competition in a given electoral context, it is not enough to have a few tiny parties scattered across the spectrum, but rather we also ought to take into consideration the relative viability of these parties.

With this as a point of departure, this article approaches the question of turnout by considering the benefits associated with greater ideological competition. The more viable and proximate choices available to potential voters, the higher the potential benefits of voting, ergo a higher probability that any single voter will participate, while controlling for established individual and institutional determinants of participation.

Explanations of Turnout on the Cost Side . . .

As turnout is declining generally, it is instructive to speculate as to exactly what the cause of this might be. There is no evidence to suggest that the actual costs of voting are increasing. Indeed, evidence suggests that in the United States costs have been reduced through the relaxation of registration laws such as 'motor voter' (Highton and Wolfinger, 1998) and all-mail

balloting or 'postal voting' (Karp and Banducci, 2001; Southwell and Burchett, 2000). Yet, in the face of such reforms aimed at reducing the barriers to participation, turnout rates remain in decline. In fact, a comparative study of US states finds that states that allow registration on election day and states that do not have voter registration still experience a trend of lower turnout (Wattenberg, 1997).

While the actual costs of voting are if anything being reduced, the net costs of voting are likewise in decline. The trend in demographic precursors suggests that turnout should be rising (Powell, 1986; Teixeira, 1987; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). More recently, attention has shifted to the role of political interest in explaining turnout. In a general study of participation (rather than a narrow focus on turnout), Verba et al. (1995) find that political interest and levels of information are the strongest indicators of participation. The findings from their 'resource model' are consistent with the social capital hypothesis of Putnam (2000), who argues that a cohort effect underlies the decline of political interest and interpersonal trust, suggesting that its source lies in declining rates of civic engagement among more recent generations.

Although the source of varying interest levels over time is not clear, it is plausible that this is a function of the utility or perceived benefits afforded by the object of attention. Lupia and McCubbins (1998) argue that attentiveness is a choice; as time is scarce individuals make decisions about subjects deserving of attentiveness. The same process might be at work regarding the decline of partisan identification. Partisanship is in decline in the United States (Wattenberg, 1998) and among Western democracies generally (Dalton, 2001), and the apparent dealignment of democratic electorates is often cited as a cause of declining turnout (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). Both declining partisanship and declining political interest might be a symptom of a decline in the perceived benefits of elections; in other words, an intervening variable rather than a pure causal factor.

... And the Benefits Side

However fruitful the aforementioned lines of research are, they tend to overlook an important part of the equation. By focusing on the buyer in an election (voters) rather than the seller (parties), the value of variance in the *B* term in the equation in explaining turnout has gone largely overlooked. Dahl observed that the choice set is a necessary condition for democracy (1971) and suggested that the number of parties in an election can serve as a proxy for the existence of a meaningful choice set (Dahl, 2002). Writing in 1985, Zipp argues that existing studies 'have a major shortcoming . . . they focus primarily on individual factors and do not consider the importance of the options available to individuals' (p. 50). Only very recently has the picture begun to change.

Sufficient theoretical and empirical evidence exists to suggest that a further examination of perceived benefits in explaining turnout has value. Zipp reports strong evidence that indicates the importance of research aimed at understanding the role of the seller in explaining turnout. 'The most important finding is that measuring the gap between an individual's positions on issues and his perceptions of all the candidates' positions on the same issues . . . significantly increases one's ability to explain turnout' (Zipp, 1985: 58). When a potential voter has a clear choice between the options, and is sufficiently close to one of those options, the probability of voting increases.

There is further evidence to demonstrate that proximity enhances perceived benefits of participation from an empirical examination of the minority empowerment thesis. In districts where a like minority holds office, African-Americans in the United States and Maori in New Zealand are found more likely to participate in elections: 'minority representation increases the probability that minority citizens will vote *in those places where minorities hold office*'⁵ (Banducci et al., 2004: 24). Likewise, a recent examination of the policy flexibility of 'niche' parties suggests that their supporters are more ideologically rather than strategically attuned (Adams et al., 2006). These findings, combined with those of Zipp, suggest that perceived proximity to the choices on offer help explain part of the participation puzzle.

Recently, greater attention has been paid to the benefit side of the equation. While most of his argument concerns the socialization of cohorts into the electorate and it is largely temporal, Franklin argues that turnout 'is not (generally speaking) about how people approach elections; rather, it is mainly about how elections appear to people' (2004: 6). He proceeds to call this the 'electoral competition' model of turnout, stressing that 'turnout will be highest when electoral competition is greatest' and reduced in elections 'where competition between parties (whether in terms of the closeness of the race or the likelihood of the election leading to substantively important policy change) is less' (Franklin, 2004: 57).

In a similar vein, Aarts and Wessels (2005) pursue an investigation into the 'supply side', which focuses on the benefits term, as opposed to the 'demand side', which focuses on costs. In an examination of content analysis data of party manifestos from six European countries, they find no clear relationship in either a rush to the centre among parties, or a clear relationship between polarization and turnout. However, in a more sophisticated logistic regression model utilizing survey data from the six countries, Aarts and Wessels do find that both indifferent and alienated voters are considerably less likely to vote. This latter finding, based on individual-level data, is more compelling as it concerns individuals' perceptions rather than the objective reality of the electoral context.

Several testable hypotheses can be derived from the above discussion. As this article is largely concerned with the effect of perceived benefits of voting, as opposed to institutional or individual cost-oriented explanations, the formal articulation of hypotheses is limited to the perceived proximity of

potential voters to viable choices in the presence of controls for the standard individual and institutional explanations of voter turnout. Furthermore, as the potential benefits of voting are not only mere representation, but ultimately influencing government policy, viability is included in the hypotheses.

The first is specified at the individual level, in line with the findings of Aarts and Wessels (2005) and Zipp (1985). Specifically, the closer in ideological terms that a potential voter finds herself to the perceived position of the choices on offer, the higher the probability that this person will cast a ballot:

H1: As the perceived ideological distance between the voter and the nearest party narrows, weighted by electoral viability, the probability of voting increases.

The second hypothesis is measured at the contextual level. The greater the overall coverage of the ideological continuum in a given election in a given country by viable electoral options, the higher the overall level of turnout in that election, when controlling for existing institutional explanations for cross-national variation in turnout. This is consistent with the unobserved expectations at the contextual level by Aarts and Wessels (2005), though it is measured by individual perceptions rather than an objective reality of where the parties are placed on a left to right continuum:

H2: The greater the ideological coverage presented to voters by the parties competing for election, weighted by electoral viability, the higher the probability of voting increases.

Data, Methods and Measures

Data

Testing propositions similar to those outlined above requires a data source that draws on individual- and contextual-level data. Not only is it necessary to include appropriate and consistent measures at the individual level, the sample itself needs to be sufficiently large that relationships between the contextual and individual level can be tested with adequate statistical power.

The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) offers a cross-national survey designed to address the effect of institutional variation on the mass electorate. Local teams implement a common instrument at the time of a national election. Currently, the CSES secretariat maintains data deposited from over 30 countries. Individual-level data from each country are based on a random probability sample of eligible voters.⁶ The battery of questions asked in each country is the same, allowing for a valid pooling of measures at the individual level while testing for variance in contextual measures. The CSES version dated July 2002 is used for this analysis. It includes data on 39 elections from 34 countries, with an individual level *N* of over 64,000.

The research design allows for significant variation at both the institutional and individual levels, while holding potential cultural explanations constant. Discrete effects of institutional characteristics, including electoral rules, the number of effective parties, the general ideological coverage that those parties offer, and the age of the democracy, can be modelled simultaneously with standard individual-level effects.

Methods

Six models are estimated that utilize two different modelling techniques. The first two are treated as primary, while the remaining four are confirmatory. Confirmatory models are reported for two reasons. First, it has been well documented in the literature that over-reporting is a concern when using survey data (e.g. Brady et al., 1995; Katosh and Traugott, 1981; Swaddle and Heath, 1989). While systematic bias has been found generally to affect those who are predisposed to vote in the first place (Silver et al., 1986), recent evidence suggests that it also varies contextually across countries and from election to election (Karp and Brockington, 2005). An analysis that models self-reported turnout needs to account for this.

Second, due to problems with modelling nested or hierarchical data structures, two additional models replicate the first two models using a Hierarchical Linear technique for a dichotomous dependent variable. As contextual measures vary predictably for individual cases residing within a given country (i.e. contextual variables are, in effect, constants for each discrete country), reliance on standard modelling techniques such as logistic or ordinary least squares regression violates the assumption of independency, resulting in reduced estimates of standard errors and increasing the probability of rejecting the null hypothesis when retention is appropriate. HLM avoids this by estimating distinct models at each level, and by estimating unique level 1 models for each level 2 unit (Bryk and Raudenbush, 1992). In effect, unique models of individual-level determinants of turnout are estimated for each country/election, and a second level model that accounts for variation in country-level contextual measures.

Measures

Individual: Minimum Ideological Distance from Party. The measures most critical to testing the hypotheses outlined above are discussed first, while a briefer discussion of other variables follows. The first hypothesis predicts that the probability of voting is reduced the greater the distance in ideological terms between the potential voter and her perception of the nearest party. However, it is not enough to assume that a voter will reflexively vote for the nearest party, as the literature on strategic (or tactical) voting informs us. Therefore, to account for the greater viability of stronger parties, the

perceived distance between potential voter and party is weighted by the electoral viability of that party. The measure *Minimum Ideological Distance from Party* reported in the models is measured by the following ratio:

$$X = \text{MIN} ([\text{ABS}]R_i - P_{ij}/VP_j)$$

Where: $[\text{ABS}]R_i - P_{ij}$ refers to the absolute perceived distance between respondent i and party j on the ideological scale. VP_j is the vote percentage, expressed as a decimal of 1, that party j received in elections to the lower house.

While inexact, in dividing distance by the percentage of the vote, a similar distance from two parties of differing viability will in effect reward the party that is more viable with a smaller 'distance' measure. As the direction of the distance (e.g. is the party to the left or to the right of the voter) is not important to testing the hypotheses above, the absolute value is calculated. Once the absolute distance has been adjusted for party viability, the minimum value is used to represent the minimum ideological distance from the nearest viable party.⁷

To offer an example, suppose that a hypothetical voter is on the right wing of the ideological continuum, expressing an ideological value of 9 on the zero to 10-point scale. Of the four parties offering competition in a parliamentary election, this voter perceives the two nearest to hold ideological positions of 8 and 7. A raw measure of distance would assign a 1 for the nearest party and a 2 for the next party. However, if the nearest of these two conservative parties is much weaker than the second, the raw measure of distance fails to capture the stronger viability of the latter.

Contextual: Coverage of Ideological Space. The same logic is applied to the contextual measure of ideological coverage. The CSES includes individual perceptions of the ideological positions of up to six parties for each country. While many studies have included a measure of effective parties in parliament or total effective parties competing in an election, such measures fail to account for the ideological spread of these parties. If a country has six parties all clustered in the centre (as some do), the perception of a voter on either extreme of the continuum is the same as if that country had three or two parties competing. A measure, *Effective Ideological Coverage of Parties*, is constructed to capture ideological spread, rather than a raw count of effective parties. At its essence, this is the standard deviation of the average individual perception of party placement on the ideological continuum for each country. The idea behind this is that standard deviation effectively captures the spread of a measure across its range; the higher the standard deviation of the perceived placement of the various parties competing, the greater the overall ideological coverage. Furthermore, as with the perceived distance variable, this is weighted for viability. As central to the benefit term in the equation is not only representation, but to influence

policy through the electoral mechanism, niche parties with no chance of governing on their own and possibly limited chance of serving in a coalition are weighted less than stronger, more electorally viable, parties.

In order to adjust for viability while retaining the concept behind the standard deviation (SD) measure, the average perceived positions of the various parties for a given country are stacked by their electoral strength. For example, if a given country has four parties competing, with average perceived placements of 2, 5, 7 and 8, an unadjusted standard deviation measure would simply calculate the SD of those four values. To arrive at the adjusted SD measure, the number of 'cases' is set to 100 for each country (rather than four in this case), and the value for each party is given as many 'cases' in the measure as they have electoral support expressed as a percentage, and then the standard deviation is calculated. One effect results in smaller standard deviations across the included countries, ergo less overall variance on the measure.⁸

Several additional contextual measures are included in the models. Recent research has demonstrated differing contextual effects of the age of the democracy and attitudes such as satisfaction with democracy, the influence of economic analyses in arriving at democratic satisfaction, and participation (Brockington and Bowler, 2003; Thomassen and Van der Kolk, 2000). The age of democracy is a three-point ordinal scale that divides democracies based on the continuity of the current democratic regime. Those democracies that were established prior to 1945 are coded 3, between 1945 and 1990 a 2 and following 1990 a 1. The second contextual-level measure is whether or not the electoral arrangements are governed by PR.⁹ A measure is included that accounts for the presence of (relatively) strict enforcement of compulsory voting in Australia, as this has been demonstrated repeatedly as a major incentive to participation.

As a paradox exists in the literature on PR and turnout, specifically that while PR is associated with higher levels of turnout (Blais and Carty, 1990; Bowler et al., 2001; Franklin, 1996; Powell, 1980) while large party systems (presumably fostered by PR) are shown to be associated with lower levels of turnout (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Jackman, 1987; Jackman and Miller, 1995), a measure of the effective number of parties is included in some models as a control.¹⁰ If not controlled for, the measure of ideological coverage might be conflated with the number of parties, leading to a negative finding (where ideological coverage is associated with lower levels of turnout) rather than the positive finding that the hypothesis predicts. To measure the number of parties, the Laasko and Taagepera (1979) formula for determining the 'effective number of parties' based on seat share in parliament is employed.¹¹

Individual measures in addition to the aforementioned perceived distance variable include the standard demographic and attitudinal characteristics long viewed as motivators of turnout. These include the age of the respondent, education level normalized across all countries to account for the variety

of educational systems, income (again normalized such that it is relative to the country in which the respondent resides, and is measured with a five-point ordinal scale based on quintiles) and strength of partisan identification. Partisanship is measured through a series of questions that assigns a value of affectation to political parties relevant to the respondent's country. The highest rated party in this series is considered the party that the respondent feels closest to; intensity of this affective relationship is measured by the absolute value on the 10-point scale for the highest rated party.

The CSES measures external efficacy with several questions, one that asks whether it matters who is in power, one that asks whether or not it matters for whom one votes, and one that asks whether or not parties care about the average voter. All are coded on five-point ordinal scales, with higher values representing a greater sense of efficacy. Several additional individual-level variables are included; among these are whether or not one believes parties are necessary, the level of satisfaction with the performance of democracy and whether or not one has been contacted by a candidate for parliament.

Finally, over-reporting of turnout is a problem that needs to be accounted for in cross-national survey research as there is a systematic relationship between the culture of turnout in both countries and elections within those countries and the tendency to over-report turnout (Karp and Brockington, 2005). The two confirmatory models that address the over-reporting problem use an estimated turnout variable that attempts to mimic the advantages of a validated turnout measure, utilizing a method suggested in Brockington (2004). Briefly, for each country, a ratio is constructed comparing reported turnout with official turnout, resulting in a rough probability that any single respondent to the CSES has over-reported. This is used randomly to select out of the pool of reported voters a percentage equal to the rate of over-reporting, which are then counted as non-voters (along with the existing pool of non-voters) in each country.

Findings

The six models reported below are best understood as two primary and four confirmatory models. The models vary in specification by including different contextual measures (whether or not the effective number of parties measure is included as a control) and the estimation technique employed. The same individual-level variables are included in all six models. Table 1 reports the first four models, which are estimated with logistic regression. Model 1 includes data drawn on all 28 democracies, while due to the inclusion of the effective number of parties measure, Model 2 draws on a smaller set of more established democracies. Models 3 and 4 replicate 1 and 2 by using the adjusted measure of turnout to account for contextual variance on over-reporting.

Table 1. Effect of ideological coverage on turnout in 28 democracies: logistic regression models

<i>Dependent variable</i>	<i>Self-reported turnout</i>		<i>Adjusted turnout</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Age	0.02*** (0.001)	0.02*** (0.001)	0.01*** (0.001)	0.01*** (0.001)
Education	0.14*** (0.01)	0.14*** (0.011)	0.08*** (0.008)	0.08*** (0.008)
Strength of PID	0.41*** (0.016)	0.38*** (0.018)	0.23*** (0.013)	0.20*** (0.014)
Satisfaction	0.15*** (0.02)	0.18*** (0.023)	0.08*** (0.017)	0.10*** (0.018)
Parties care	0.07*** (0.014)	0.06*** (0.016)	0.03* (0.012)	0.02 (0.013)
Parties are necessary	0.06*** (0.015)	0.08*** (0.016)	0.06*** (0.012)	0.06*** (0.013)
Contacted by MP	0.43*** (0.056)	0.45*** (0.058)	0.22*** (0.039)	0.24*** (0.040)
It matters who holds power	0.08*** (0.014)	0.09*** (0.015)	0.03** (0.011)	0.05*** (0.012)
Voting matters	0.15*** (0.013)	0.14*** (0.015)	0.11*** (0.011)	0.08*** (0.012)
Age of democracy	0.20*** (0.021)	0.15*** (0.026)	0.10*** (0.017)	-0.06** (0.021)
Compulsory voting	1.69*** (0.178)	1.75*** (0.18)	0.49*** (0.075)	0.57*** (0.077)
Effective ideological coverage of parties	0.06* (0.026)	0.40*** (0.034)	0.31*** (0.022)	0.57*** (0.028)
Minimum ideological distance from party	-0.06*** (0.012)	-0.06*** (0.013)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.010)
Effective number of parties	- (0.012)	-0.12*** (0.019)	- (0.012)	-0.09*** (0.015)
Intercept	-2.62*** (0.121)	-2.66*** (0.134)	-2.00*** (0.098)	-1.66*** (0.108)
Pseudo R^2	0.14	0.14	0.07	0.07
N	32,326	29,099	32,326	29,099
% predicted	83.9	84.9	71.2	73.1

Dependent variable in Models 1 and 2 self-reported turnout; Models 3 and 4 estimated 'true' turnout.

MIDP variable transformed by taking the square root of the original.

Standard errors for the estimates are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed t -tests).

In all four models reported in Table 1, the estimates of individual-level variables are consistent with prior research; there are no surprises here. Consistent with the earlier findings of Zipp (1985), the minimum perceived distance from the nearest party performs as the first general hypothesis of this article predicts: the more distant the perception from the nearest party, the less likely the respondent will turn out to vote. Recall that this is adjusted for the electoral viability of the various parties, so this demonstrates that both distance and viability are important.

However, the adjusted ideological coverage measure reports a relatively weak finding. Model 2, specified the same as Model 1 but with the inclusion of the effective number of parties measure, appears to rectify this situation. As discussed above, there is reason to suspect that the ideological coverage measure on its own also captures the deleterious effects of larger party systems on turnout. When the latter are controlled, the ideological coverage of parties presented to the electorate, adjusted for viability, appears to strongly enhance participation. Furthermore, the estimate of this measure in Model 2 is more substantive than that of perceived distance.

Models 3 and 4 'replicate' the first two models by accounting for contextual variance in over-reporting. The individual-level findings are consistent with what we know about over-reporting from comparisons of validated turnout with self-reported turnout. Specifically, those who are likely to over-report are those who are predisposed to vote in the first place (Silver et al., 1986); the effect of comparing validated with self-reported vote is that modelling the former reports less substantive individual-level predictors of turnout than those drawn upon self-reported turnout. While not relying on validated turnout, Models 3 and 4 demonstrate a similar pattern in individual-level predictors. Critically, the reason for reporting these confirmatory models still holds. While the minimum ideological distance from party measure has a less substantive impact (as the literature on over-reporting predicts), it is still significant and in the anticipated direction. Likewise, the contextual measure of ideological coverage also retains significance and in the predicted direction. The estimated R^2 of the two models of adjusted turnout are lower, but this is also consistent with previous research (Karp and Brockington, 2005: 837).

Table 2 reports two HLM models that replicate Models 1 and 2. These models confirm the findings of the logistic regression models, and further indicate that the statistical problems inherent with nested data structures do not fatally affect the findings reported above. The only difference worth noting is that the effective ideological coverage of parties appears substantively weaker in the HLM estimation. Nonetheless, the findings reported in Models 5 and 6 are consistent with those reported earlier: the greater the ideological 'spread' of the parties on offer at an election increases turnout, while the greater the distance from the nearest party (adjusted for viability) decreases turnout at the individual level.

Table 2. Effect of ideological coverage on turnout: HLM models

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Level 1 models</i>	
	<i>Model 5</i>	<i>Model 6</i>
Age	0.001*** (0.0001)	0.001*** (0.0001)
Education	0.015*** (0.001)	0.016*** (0.001)
Strength of PID	0.053*** (0.002)	0.049*** (0.002)
Satisfaction	0.012*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)
Parties care	0.008*** (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)
Parties are necessary	0.009*** (0.002)	0.012*** (0.002)
Contacted by MP	0.030*** (0.006)	0.020** (0.006)
It matters who holds power	0.010*** (0.002)	0.013*** (0.002)
Voting matters	0.023*** (0.002)	0.015*** (0.002)
Minimum ideological distance from party	-0.002*** (0.0004)	-0.001** (0.0004)
<i>Level 2 models</i> (Effect of contextual variables on Level 1 intercepts)		
Age of democracy	0.034*** (0.003)	0.017** (0.006)
Compulsory voting	0.092*** (0.011)	0.112*** (0.011)
Proportional representation	0.062*** (0.005)	-0.024** (0.008)
PR × min. threshold	-0.020*** (0.001)	-0.016*** (0.001)
Effective ideological coverage of parties	0.017*** (0.004)	0.075*** (0.007)
Effective number of parties	—	0.011** (0.003)
Intercept	1.41*** (0.014)	1.44*** (0.017)
Level 2 <i>N</i>	28	15
Level 1 <i>N</i>	32,932	21,893

Dependent variable in all models is reported turnout, estimated with HLM 5 for a dichotomous dependent variable. Robust standard errors for the estimates are in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed t -tests).

At first blush, there is one odd result in Model 6. Even while controlling for the effective number of parties as per the Gallagher index, and the minimum threshold present in a given PR system, PR as an electoral rule appears to decrease turnout. The primary benefit of PR is supposed to be the greater number of choices on offer and the higher precision with which PR translates preferences at the individual level into the distribution of representation in the national legislature. The combined influences of the ideological coverage measure and the minimum perceived ideological distance from the nearest party, both adjusted for viability, probably captures these advantages of PR. The residual effect of PR in these models is possibly variance in the nature of the coalitions that result (Brockington, 2004). Likewise, while the interaction of PR with the minimum threshold for election results in a negative estimate, this make sense when one considers that an increase in the minimum threshold results in a less proportional system overall.

It is instructive to illustrate how the two key measures that test the hypotheses outlined above compare substantively to common determinants of turnout, especially as this can be difficult when the various measures examined have not been rescaled to be comparable (which they have not been here). Figure 1 reports an effects analysis calculated based on Model 2. It includes the two central measures of ideological distance and coverage, as well as age and education. The effect of each variable plotted in Figure 1 on the probability of voting is done at 10 points across the range of the measure

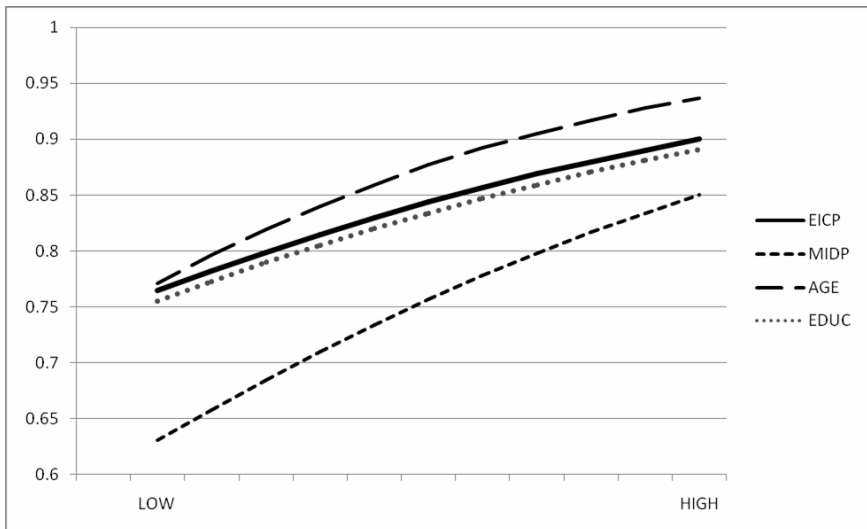


Figure 1. Relative effects of four variables on the probability of voting

Trend lines illustrate the discrete effect of a given single variable from Model 2 reported in Table 1, calculated while holding all other variables at their mean values.

EICP = Effective ideological coverage of parties; MIDP = minimum ideological distance from party; AGE = age of respondent; EDUC = educational attainment of respondent.

while holding every other variable in the model at its mean value. One can see here that the contextual-level measure of effective ideological coverage of parties has an effect commensurate with education, and slightly weaker than age. While minimum distance from party has a stronger slope estimate when all variables are held at their mean value, the overall effect is less pronounced.

Discussion

Both hypotheses examined in this article are supported by the data. First, the greater the perceived distance between potential voter and the nearest party, adjusted for viability, results in a lower probability of participation. Second, as the ideological coverage of the parties on offer becomes more constricted, turnout is reduced. These findings exist in the presence of numerous individual and contextual explanations of turnout, and are confirmed against estimated variance in respondent over-reporting and with robust standard errors. In short, analyses of turnout that ignore the benefits term in the equation present an incomplete understanding of why turnout varies across and within countries.

It would be beneficial to build on these findings with a longitudinal research design. Considering that the initial discussion argues that many of the previous studies are ill-equipped to examine the overall change in turnout because they either lack a comparative component (i.e. they manage to study change in one country while opposing findings result in other contexts) or a longitudinal component, this article obviously suffers from the latter. If the models reported here can be replicated with longitudinal data using election studies from a representative sample of the countries included here, we could make stronger claims as to what is happening over time as well as over space. As several studies have suggested or implied that centripetal effects are causing parties to move to the centre, it would be beneficial to observe this empirically over time to assess the effect on participation rates.

What has changed that has affected democratic elections? It is possible that due to two historical events, the fall of Communism in Europe and the advent of broad and highly integrated capital markets, have served to constrict the legitimate policy space in which national governments can act. This, in turn, affects how parties market themselves to the potential electorate. Parties of the left no longer position themselves on the left, but rather market themselves as centrist candidates. Ultimately, there is less to fight over in the electoral arena, thus limiting the potential benefits of participation. While largely speculation, there is limited evidence in support of this thesis. Franklin (2004) places great emphasis on the concept of 'executive responsiveness', which captures the ability for any given election to have an effect on policy outputs of government. He openly speculates that 'globalization' would fit neatly into his theoretical framework, and tests this in a sense through examining the ceding of national powers to the European Union (Franklin, 2004:

178–80). Furthermore, in Canadian ridings where a candidate for parliament stood for election from the ‘mildly socialist’ New Democratic Party, rates of non-voting among the working class were lower compared to ridings without such a candidate (Zipp and Smith, 1982).

Within the limitations of cross-sectional research, this article does demonstrate that variance in the ideological coverage of parties competing for election makes a difference in overall rates of participation. Put another way, we need to focus not only on the demand side of elections, but the supply side as well, when addressing the turnout puzzle. If the market is not offering what the consumer wants, the consumer has little reason to participate.

Notes

- 1 The severity of this ‘near-crisis situation’ can be overstated; see Franklin (2004) for a less concerned analysis of turnout variance.
- 2 While technically not the same variable, both P and B in a multiplicative specification measure the same underlying concept of *expected benefit*. As empirical findings support the notion that most voters do not overestimate their own probability of casting a decisive vote, the resulting vanishingly small value associated with P renders any variance in the benefit term substantively irrelevant, ‘absent heroic assumptions about the size of expected benefits’ (Franklin, 2004: 39) in a multiplicative specification. An additive specification measures two discrete concepts, affording equal weight to P and B in the calculus. Thus, theoretically at least, B can matter.
- 3 Downs (1957: 298) suggests a couple of reasons why one might vote for a ‘hopeless’ party, including ‘they are future oriented and the party’s hopelessness is relatively new, or they hope to influence another party’s platform by so doing’. Note that either of these motivations for casting a hopelessly sincere vote retains the ultimate goal of influencing power somehow at some point in the near future.
- 4 Franklin has been investigating this concept for over a decade now, and, as he of course notes, Powell (2000) examines a similar concept that he names ‘responsiveness in choosing policymakers’. Either way, the benefit of having an impact in the outcome of governance is more important than merely being represented in parliament.
- 5 Italics in the original.
- 6 With the exception of New Zealand and Australia, where the sample is drawn from registered voters. As registration in both countries is mandatory, the practical implications of the differently drawn samples should be negligible.
- 7 Due to a long right tail of the distribution of this variable, it has also been transformed by taking the square root of the measure.
- 8 To explain in greater detail, using the example above, the unadjusted value of the ‘ideological coverage’ of these four parties is scored 2.65. If the parties at position 2 have 5 percent support, position 5 have 45 percent, position 7 have 35 percent and position 8 have 15 percent, the resulting SD is 1.49. This adjustment accounts for the relative dearth of viable parties on the left. Thus, it reflects a more accurate picture of ideological coverage of the choices on offer, and hence the perceived benefit of participating in an election to a potential voter.

- 9 The implementation of PR is highly nuanced, determined by features including but not limited to district magnitude, legal electoral threshold, the divisor rule employed, and in the cases of mixed systems whether or not the PR component is corrective or non-corrective. Ideally, a measure of disproportionality should be employed instead of the blunt instrument of a dichotomous measure. However, such data are currently only available on a subset of the countries in the data set.
- 10 However, this paradox appears to be spurious, as it might not be the effective number of parties that leads to lower levels of participation, but rather the nature of the resulting coalition governments (Brockington, 2004).
- 11 This is calculated as $1N = \frac{1}{\sum s_i^2}$, where s_i is the proportion of seats by the i th party. The benefit of using this measure as opposed to a simple sum of the competing parties available is that the relative electoral strength of the parties is taken into account here. The data source for this measure is Lijphart (1999).

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