Democratic Participation and Political Communication in Systems of Multi-level Governance

The Study of Voter Turnout: State of the Art

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Introduction

This paper provides a critical review of the literature on electoral participation in systems of multi-level governance. Its purpose is to provide a launch pad for the project “Democratic participation and political communication in systems of multi-level governance” [Part-com Multi-Level] being conducted under the auspices of the Fifth Framework Programme. It aims to do this by extracting from the existing literature the implications and lessons, theoretical and methodological, that can be applied to the project.

Voter turnout has tended to fall over the last number of decades. This fall accelerated in the 1990s. The trend is paradoxical because education and access to political information have generally increased and such factors are seen to conducive to increased political participation. Both individual and aggregate-level analyses of voter abstention point to the factors that are responsible for decreasing participation. However, there has been little work on linking individual perceptions of the political process with the aggregate level context in which citizens live.

This connection is at the heart of explaining why political participation changes. Unfortunately previous research has provided a partial picture of this process and how it works. Understanding why voter turnout is declining requires new data resources, improved research designs and a more nuanced conceptualisation of both turnout and abstention. The purpose of the Partcom Multilevel Project is to bring these new resources and new approaches to bear on the problem and, in this way to substantially enhance the state of the art in regard to the study of participation with particular reference to participation in systems of multilevel governance.

Specifying the dependent variables:

Who are the voters and the non-voters?

Surprisingly, many studies of political participation do not explicitly delineate the object of their study – voters versus non-voters. This is most evident in terms of two aspects, voting population definition and unit of analysis. First, most definitions

1 Details of the programme are available at the following website; http://www.ucd.ie/~dempart/
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reflect the different types of datasets used, whether individual or aggregate, national or cross-national, single time points or time series. This leads to differing categorisations of what constitutes voters and non-voters. Whether one uses the ‘voting age population’, ‘registered electorate’, ‘voting eligible population’ can have fundamental implications for deciding the level of political participation and whether or not it is changing over time (McDonald & Popkin 2000).

Secondly, post-election surveys, which depend on voter self-reporting have been characterised by substantial “overreporting”. Response validity research has attempted to verify, through consultation of public records, whether or not citizens are registered to vote and have voted as they claim in election surveys (Silver, Anderson et al 1996; Swaddle & Heath 1989). Such research is important as it leads to an assessment of whether those who misleadingly claim to have voted are more similar to persistent abstainers than to regular voters (Abramson & Claggett 1992; Presser & Traugott 1992). The most recent evidence suggests that infrequent abstainers are more like regular voters and that their reasons for not voting in specific elections relate to circumstantial factors such as work, travel or illness (see, Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson 1998). This highlights the importance of viewing non-voters as a heterogeneous group. Figure suggests that categorising individuals into five groups, i.e. core voters, marginal voters, non-voters, non-registered citizens and non-citizens yields additional insight into the dynamics of changes in voter turnout (see figure 1).

<<< Figure 1, about here >>>

Such a categorisation shows that changes in voter abstention can arise from a variety of causal mechanisms, some of which relate to specific factors such as interest in a particular election, personal circumstances and some of which arise from more general contextual factors such as the socio-demographic context.

**Theories of voter turnout**

*Sociological theories of voting behaviour* focus on life conditions that have an impact on individuals’ ability to participate in electoral politics. One key variable often noted is age, with increasing age being seen to increase political experience and sense of investment in the community. Sociological perspectives frequently focus on the concept of ‘social exclusion’. The argument here is that if voters do not have
adequate skills and resources for electoral participation then turnout will be low, because socio-economic and educational deprivation transforms social exclusion into political exclusion.

*Psychological or ‘political mobilisation’ theories of voting behaviour* focus on what motivates individuals to go to the polls. The available evidence since the 1980s suggests that, while interest in politics is strongly related to turnout, turnout has declined in a context of generally increasing interest in a wider range of issues dealt with in the media. One explanation advanced for this phenomenon has been ‘negative’ media reporting and the portrayal of politics as a “game” in which there is great emphasis on the results of opinion polls (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995: 112; Norris 2000; Heath & Taylor 1999). In addition contemporary research on the role of the media and its impact on turnout, has moved toward an examination of both individual level and context effects (see, Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch & Weaver, 1991; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell & Semetko 1999).

*Economic theories of voting behaviour* have often argued that it is irrational to vote because of the very small chance of deciding the outcome and the costs incurred in going to the polling station, where little benefit is gained. One motivation put forward for voting has been maintenance of the regime (Riker & Ordeshook 1968; Enelow & Hinich 1990). Strategic or structural approaches to turnout are related to economic theories - individual voters are seen to estimate how powerful an electoral institution is when deciding whether or not to turnout to vote. Consequently, turnout for second order elections is relatively low, though voting is seen to be effective in sending signals to where power is concentrated, i.e. national governments. Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson (1998) argue that the empirical evidence on such strategic considerations for European Parliament elections overestimates the impact of individuals’ perceptions of the structures and locus of power and accountability and that such considerations do not explain differential turnout patterns across countries or over time. The contribution of “economic” or rational choice approaches to the explanation of electoral participation is taken up in more detail below.

*Situational explanations of voting* tend to fit with economic explanations of voter participation by emphasising empirical evidence that indicates that turnout is affected by the voting day (weekday or weekend), hours of voting, accessibility of polling stations, ease of voting registration, facilities such as postal voting, etc. (see,
Franklin 1996, 1999). Other considerations noted include the density of polling stations, which may have an impact on the cost of voting as the economic theories of voting suggest. Empirical research has used elements of these different theories to explain voter participation, resulting in some general explanations of increasing voter abstention being put forward.

Eclectic empirical explanations: Recent empirical explanations of electoral participation tend to use aspects of the four main theories of electoral participation. These eclectic empirical explanations come in three main forms. The first argues that individuals’ decisions as to whether or not to vote are based on an individual’s “resources”. The second perspective highlights the level and degree of “political mobilisation” while the third strand emphasises the importance of “instrumental motivation”. The “instrumental motivation” approach is often divided into “institutional” and “systemic” factors that are of course strongly linked (Franklin 1996; Norris 2000).

Resource explanations look at voter abstention from the individual perspective. In this approach socio-demographic evidence from survey data is used to illustrate the importance of variables such as age, level of education, socio-economic status, etc. Nevitte et al. (2000: 21) using CSES data for eighteen countries found that “SES, and particularly age, education, attendance at religious services and household income, continue to influence non-voting, regardless of levels of aggregate economic wealth, electoral history, electoral rules and number of parties”. Within the literature on voter participation at European elections there has been debate over whether or not knowledge and interest in European integration and its institutions affect turnout (Franklin 1996; Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson 1998).

Mobilisation accounts of electoral participation highlight the importance of organisations in facilitating greater levels of voting by individuals. These organisations range from the formal such as political parties, trade unions and churches to more informal ones such as voluntary groups, families, work colleagues, etc. (see, Wolfinger & Hansen 1995). A decline in the importance of these formal and informal organisations has been seen as contributing toward the long-term decline in voter turnout in the United States (Knack 1992; Putnam 1995: 67-68; Aldrich 1995; Wattenberg 1998; Putnam 2000). From a policy perspective, Abramson & Aldrich
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(1982) made the important discovery that in the United States changes in attitudinal factors which worked to reduce turnout had a greater impact than institutional factors such as extending the franchise and costs of registration which should have boosted participation.

Institutional explanations have focussed on legal criteria such as voting rights, registration rules, and type of electoral system. Jackman & Miller (1995) in a cross-country analysis found that political institutions and electoral laws explained most of the variation in voter turnout in national elections. Working at the supra-national level, research into voting in European elections has found that variations in participation between member states can be largely explained by systemic features such as proportionality, compulsory voting, closeness of the most recent national election (see, Franklin et al. 1993; Oppenhuis 1995; van der Eijk et al. 1996). Relevant systemic features noted in the United States are registration provisions and the frequency of elections (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980).

The Rational Choice approach and empirical research

In general, the most influential theoretical approach to voter turnout during the 1970s and 1980s concentrated on individual-level rational choice explanations. However, most empirical research on voter participation has tended to deal with aggregate level data and macro-level explanations based on sociological and institutional factors. (see tables 1 & 2). This cross-level division resulted in confusion. Consequently, by the early 1990s the voter turnout literature had two sets of hypotheses concerning voter participation that were not only mutually exclusive, but also in some cases inconsistent (Lane & Ersson 1990).

For example, empirical analysis of aggregate level data suggested a number of conflicting mechanisms affecting electoral participation. Such inconsistent hypotheses derived from the failure to develop a theoretical conception of voters’ motivations. In contrast, individual-level hypotheses based on rational choice theory were criticised for being rather simplistic and accounting for changes in turnout and not the more fundamental question of why voters turn out to vote in the first place. In
addition, the rational choice approach was criticised for being unrealistic (i.e. large numbers of citizens do vote) and for ignoring the fact that the costs of voting are small and real benefits may derive from voting (Crepaz 1990, see also, Grofman 1993: 94).

However, rational choice attempts to introduce the idea of “side payments”, where group leaders encourage turnout in a group, such as a trade union, in order to have more influence over candidates or the idea of voting on the basis of patronage have been rejected as being empirically unproven (Uhlaner 1989, Schwartz 1987, Green & Shapiro 1994: 53). Because of the theoretical, empirical and methodological difficulties involved recent rational choice research has modified its theoretical assumptions and used alternative empirical techniques such as simulation.

The “paradox of voting” issue has also been examined using game theory. Using a game theoretic, rather than decision theoretic approach as espoused by Downs, has one very important implication. Game theoretic solutions are based on the idea that for all of the electorate to abstain cannot be an equilibrium point because each voter could then decide the election by opting to vote. By using mixed strategies, game theory models indicate the existence of many Nash-equilibria with high voter turnout. However, most of these (non-trivial) asymmetric equilibria involve accepting that there is a high level of coordination among voters. Not surprisingly such game theoretic results are seen to be unrealistic.

As a result, the modelling of coordination in ‘voting games’ has become an important area of research. One method of solving the coordination problem has been to argue that the common knowledge held by voters is limited. Consequently, voters are uncertain about either the payoffs of voting or the number of players (Palfrey & Rosenthal 1985; Myerson 1998). In such modified games many of the remaining asymmetric equilibria result in predictions of low voter participation just as the Downsian decision theoretic approach predicted. Thus, the “paradox of voting” returns - with positive costs of voting, the expected number of people who vote will be a small proportion of the total electorate (Palfrey & Rosenthal 1985: 64).

One attempt at finding an answer as to why so many citizens do vote in elections is based on changing the payoff assumptions. The most influential expression of this view (Riker & Ordeshook 1968) was that the costs of voting are negative because individuals are socialised to see voting as a responsibility of citizenship. Unfortunately, using the idea of negative costs to answer the paradox of voting
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...question fails to solve the problem of why voters vote in the first place. More recently, two other alternative approaches have been suggested.

In the first, voting is seen to be costly and the payoffs of voting are seen to be positive as in the classic decision theoretic approach. However, the assumptions of rationality are changed. Voters are seen to use adaptive rationality where “they learn to vote or stay at home” by a process of trial and error. This mechanism is based on reinforced learning where individuals decide whether or not to vote on the basis of an ‘aspiration level’ which defines whether or not election outcomes and payoffs are positive or negative. The individuals’ aspiration level is itself determined by prior experience, i.e. the payoffs from previous elections. This complex model based on neo-institutionalist and behaviorist theories was tested on simulated data. Solving the voter coordination problem through adaptive rationality suggests that while the costs of electoral participation may not be inconsequential, turnout can still be high. In addition, high participation will exist even if there are large numbers of voters and the probability of casting the deciding vote is very small (Bendor, Diermeier & Ting 2000).

Recent work by Sanders (1996; 2001) has shown that if one wishes to relate information and uncertainty to voter turnout, this should be undertaken by modelling turnout and vote choice together. Registered voters evaluate electoral choices differently to those citizens who decide not to register. Furthermore, while information will increase the probability of registration, its effect on turnout depends on the intensity of individual preferences. With more information the precision of evaluations of electoral options increases, as does the probability of voting, to a point where small perceived differences between electoral choices results in abstention.

Such recent research suggests that there has been a growing tendency for empirical work to develop stronger theoretical foundations and move away from highlighting empirical observations that are explained on a post-hoc basis. At the same time, theoretical work has attempted increasingly to formulate testable hypotheses, which may be investigated using survey or aggregate level data. However, all empirical work based on statistical analysis has had to deal with a number of methodological issues depending on the type of data used.
Methodological Issues

Most published work on voter participation in elections has adopted one of the following four main approaches to data analysis. The choice of method depends on the research question being investigated and also on the data available. Given the inconsistency of some of the published empirical results, there is a growing concern that the statistical methods used on some datasets may have been inappropriate. One can distinguish five methodological approaches.

1. **Cross-sectional analysis** of several independent variables, some of which are post hoc measures, and turnout across different countries for national [lower chamber] parliament elections.

2. **Longitudinal analysis** of several independent variables and turnout across time for a specific country's [lower chamber] parliamentary elections.

3. **Correlation analysis** of electoral participation where statistical techniques such as regression, factor analysis and some forms of ecological inference explain variation in participation, the dependent variable, in terms of variation in independent variables such as age, education, closeness of competition etc.

4. **Survey data analysis** of several independent variables and turnout for national [lower chamber] parliament elections.

5. **Ecological inference analysis**, which attempts to make inferences about individual behaviour and motivations using aggregate data.

By and large the main approach has been to use a regression model where the dependent variable (turnout) is related to a number of independent variables such as age, institutional factors, closeness of electoral competition, etc. This raises two fundamental issues. Firstly, with aggregate analyses (often associated with approaches 1-3 above) specific independent variables such as, for example, closeness of electoral competition should be examined carefully since actual election closeness may not be a good surrogate measure of perceived election closeness (see, Wolfinger 1993).

Secondly, the assumption that census records or the electoral register provide an accurate reflection of the true voting age population may not always be legitimate (see, McDonald & Popkin 2000). The administrative mechanisms for the inclusion and removal of names from the voting register may be influenced by exogenous
factors such as lifestyle, e.g. working in an urban area but voting in a rural ‘home’
constituency; jury service for the court system – this is often a cost voters wish to
avoid, and emigration. Factors that could deflate turnout might include multiple
registration(s) with a mobile working population and the administration’s inefficiency
at removing the names of deceased electors or emigrants from the register. These
factors could result in a register that inflates or deflates voter turnout for exogenous
reasons. In addition it implies that the basis for cross-sectional survey work may be
systematically biased. More specifically the following problems can be identified.

Methodological problems with cross-sectional analyses: Firstly, if country is
used as the unit of analysis inferences about the relationship between turnout and
various independent variables, which reflect individual voter characteristic, may be
vulnerable to the ecological fallacy. Secondly, turnout research that focuses on one
particular type of election may fail to take account of the fact that there may be a
variety of other elections or referendums taking place simultaneously. Consequently,
within such cross-sectional analysis, some of the time series pattern or deviations are
really “intra-election effects” (see, Foster 1984). In other words, there is the danger of
confusing cross-level and cross-time effects and thus making inferences about turnout
problematic.

Methodological problems with longitudinal analyses: One important limitation
to current longitudinal studies is that they do not cover a sufficiently long time period.
Links between important variables such as political competition are more likely to be
found if a sufficient degree of variance, i.e. history, is built into a study. Thus, for
example if a country experiences less competition between parties due to an emerging
consensus on the main issues, it is plausible to expect a decrease in turnout relative to
previous levels, assuming control is made for a secular decline in international trends.

Methodological problems with correlation analyses: Some of the turnout
literature based on formal approaches such as rational choice, social choice and game
theory highlight the implications of differences between countries in the size of each
country’s mean vote, implying that the probability that a single voter will decide an
election differs from the probability in other countries. Consequently, voters will have
differential benefits from voting and candidates / parties will have a differential
incentive to influence voting in some countries more than others. In practice, this
might suggest that higher turnout is the result of a candidate(s) or party(s) intensive
campaign strategies. Therefore, turnout and election closeness, institutional factors, age, etc. will be correlated because of the candidate or party strategy - but this correlation may have nothing to do with actual turnout and closeness of competition, institutional factors, age, etc.

**Methodological problems with survey analyses:** In general survey data results may be misleading if individual voters expectations are correlated with their electoral preferences. Two approaches have been adopted with survey data. Firstly, one may test whether on average turnout is influenced by specific factors. Secondly, the attitudes or attributes of a respondent may be correlated with such respondents’ intention to vote. Both of these research strategies have some problems. Voter participation and variables such as expected closeness of the election, institutional features, age, etc. may be correlated with one another for reasons that have little direct influence on motivations to vote.

In addition, all survey research is based on two key features. Data are derived from respondents self-reporting of their own future or past behaviour – actual voting behaviour is not measured. Also, mass representative surveys are not primarily designed to measure the impact of geographical factors (King 1996: 159).²

Unfortunately, most studies of voter turnout do not use a coherent and consistent research design. In methodological terms, this has resulted in under specified models of voter turnout. Parsimonious models with less than five explanatory variables have strong explanatory power but are unrealistic (Cassel & Luskin 1988). In contrast, more realistic complex models yield more ambiguous results with weak explanatory power. Such problems indicate the need for analyses based on different types of data and theoretical mechanisms to overcome ‘identification’ problems (Manski 1996). In essence, what is required is a multi-level research strategy.

**Voter turnout at European Parliament Elections**

Individual level explanations of voter turnout for European elections since 1979 have resulted in two distinct positions. These two positions take different views on whether voting in European elections is related to the level of information or apathy

² King (1996: 160) states that "geographic variation is usually quite large to begin with, but after we control for what we have learned about voters, there isn’t much left for contextual effects. So in this narrow sense geography matters but contextual effects do not" (italics in original).
among Europeans about the Union, the salience of Union issues to citizens and whether or not ordinary Europeans support the integration project and its various institutions.3

Firstly, investigation of voter turnout in the European elections of 1989 & 1994 found that citizens’ attitudes toward the European Union (EU) and European Parliament (EP) did not have a significant impact in explaining whether or not Europeans voted (Schmitt & Mannheimer 1991; Oppenhuis 1995: 65; Franklin et al. 1996). Secondly, using data from a post-election survey contained in Eurobarometer 41.1, Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson (1998) found that attitudes toward the EU and EP did have a significant impact on explaining whether or not citizens turned out to vote.

Aggregate level explanations have found that compulsory voting, simultaneous elections, timing in the electoral cycle, Sunday voting, proportionality of the member states electoral system all increased voter turnout ceteris paribus (Oppenhuis 1995: 75; Franklin et al. 1996; Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson 1998: 245; Smith 1999: 118-120).4 Such results are perhaps more correctly seen as the interaction between individual and aggregate country level effects.

The most influential theory of EP elections is the “second-order elections” model of Reif & Schmitt (1980). The key idea in this theory is that voter turnout is lower in EP elections because they are not as important as national elections as there is no election of a European government. However, one implication of the theory is that as the EP gains more powers, as was the case with the (Maastricht) Treaty on European Union (1993), voter turnout should increase. In fact, the empirical evidence indicates that voter turnout has decreased in succeeding EP elections, despite the fact that the EP has gained more powers. One other shortcoming of the “second-order theory” is that it does not explain why there is such variation in voter turnout between countries within the EU.

Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson (1998: 13-19, 243) argue more generally that the survey evidence from the 1994 EP elections does not support the “second-order election model” explanation of voter abstention. It was found that EP election turnout

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3 This has been one of the key themes in EP electoral research, see Blumler & Fox 1982; Blumler 1984; Reif 1985b; Schmitt & Mannheimer 1991a; van der Eijk et al. 1995; Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson 1998; Mattila 2002.

4 Finally, contrary to previous research they found that electoral proportionality and timing in the electoral cycle did not have a significant impact on explaining voter turnout in European elections. See also, Mattila 2002.
is not “mainly influenced by national political attitudes”. Attitudes toward the EU, the current level of integration and future prospects were significant in explaining turnout. Also, citizens’ perceptions of the power to the EP and of differences between the power of the national parliament and of the EP were not significant in explaining turning out to vote.5

Recent criticisms of the “second-order theory” suggest that one of the central tenets of this model (that EP elections are viewed in terms of national elections) may not be always true. Mattila (2002) suggests that the evidence from the 1999 European elections is that turnout at EP elections is affected by general factors affecting turnout as such along with some specific EU factors, such as public support for the EU, country is a net contributor/beneficiary within the EU – the latter effect being somewhat smaller. For a summary of explanations of turnout in EP elections see table 5.

<<< Table 3, about here >>>

Consequently, there is the implication that the “less at stake” assumption in the “second-order-theory” is not what European voters have in mind when deciding to vote. The cost-benefit analysis seems to be more closely connected to being a net contributor or receiver of subsidies and having more MEPs.

**Electoral reforms & voter turnout**

Research on voter turnout has important policy implications as it attempts to provide an explanation as to why citizens decide to vote or not vote on election day. Most reforms relating to the administration of electoral contests aim at increasing the absolute numbers of citizens voting, thus improving political transparency and additionally making the voting population as representative as possible of society. Reforms which have been implemented may be summarised under three headings;

1. Lowering the costs of registration for citizens not registered;
   • Election day registration
   • Mail registration

5 An alternative reason for observing “apparent second-order election effects (e.g. low turnout) may be due to strategic calculations in the minds of political elites and the actions that follow from them rather than to any complex perceptions and calculations regarding the relative power being allocated in different electoral arenas that the second-order election model assumes are made by the electorate” (Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson 1998: 24).

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• Motor voter registration

2. Lowering the costs of voting for registered voters;
   • Early voting
   • Voting by mail
   • Internet voting

3. Mobilising registered voters to go and vote on election day;
   • Canvassing door-to-door
   • Telephone campaigning
   • Direct mail campaigns
   • Leaflet campaigns

Lowering the costs of registration: Early analyses of the costs of registration and voter turnout rates using aggregate data for some US cities and states found that participation in the 1960s was higher where the costs of registration were lower (Kelley, Ayres & Bowen 1967; Kim, Petrocik et al. 1973). Kim, Petrocik et al.’s (1973) study was innovative in using both aggregate and individual level data where individual level factors such as age, education and race explained over the half the variance and systemic factors such as administrative and institutional provisions explained almost a third of the variance.\(^6\)

Later work by Rosenstone & Wolfinger (1978, 1980) found that extending the date for registration, increasing the number of voting hours on election day could increase national turnout by 9.1%. However, level of education seemed to have little impact on this process (Nagler 1991). This influential line of research indicated that lowering the costs of registration was not likely to make the voting population more representative of society.

Lowering the costs of voting for registered voters: One of the methods most often implemented to increase access to voting has been to allow ‘absentee balloting’, i.e. allow voters to vote in advance of election day and submit their ballot by mail. Research indicates that voter participation increases by 2% and that this is mainly a result of political parties ensuring that their supporters have received a ballot (Oliver 1996).

\(^6\) Both of these studies expressed the view that greater understanding could only be obtained by gathering data and doing analysis at lower levels of aggregation.
Early voting is another method that has been used to increase turnout where voters are allowed to vote in person in advance of election day in convenient locations such as shopping malls. This reform was seen to increase participation by 5% on previous elections and the effect was larger for primary rather than congressional elections (Richardson & Neeley 1996). Other research found that early voting was not based on partisanship, though voters who had lower incomes, were older or had strong party attachment tended to use the voting early option. In general, early voting is seen to be more strongly correlated with voters attitudes than their socio-demographic background (Stein 1998).

Postal voting: Recently in Britain with the ‘Representation of People Act (2000)’ there has been a concerted effort to undertake research to design new electoral arrangements that increase electoral participation. Consequently, pilot studies were undertaken during the local government elections in 2000 and 2002. One of the key findings from these local election studies was that “only postal voting appeared to have the potential to significantly increase local election turnout”. It was found that with postal voting turnout in many local authority areas increased by 50 percent and turnout more than doubled where “no declaration of identity was required”. Such evidence suggests that electoral facilitation policies can have significant effects. Furthermore, postal voting did not appear to have any partisan effects favouring one political party or another. However, using postal voting only can is more costly than conventional voting-in-person polling. This is because extra security is required to ensure against abuses of secrecy and integrity of the ballot (Rallings & Thrasher 2000: 5-6; The Electoral Commission 2002: 2-3).

Mobilising registered voters: One of the key reasons noted for the increase in electoral abstention since the 1960s has been the decline in face-to-face canvassing of voters by parties. While political mobilisation in campaigns still reaches many citizens the nature of this contact has become increasingly impersonal (see, Gerber & Green 2000; Abramson, Aldrich & Rohde 1998).

In general, policy innovations that have attempted to increase citizen participation in elections by reducing the costs of registration and of casting a ballot have had only small effects. The absolute number of electors voting increases by less than 10 percentage points while efforts to make voters more representative of all citizens do not appear to work. However, little research has been undertaken on the
combined impact of a number of reforms and the effect of policy innovations over long time periods. Preliminary research does however highlight two key things. Firstly, initial model specification should deal either with voter registration or turnout. It is important theoretically and empirically not to conflate both of these phenomena. Secondly, electoral participation and electoral choice should be modelled together rather than be seen as separate processes.

**Policy implications of variations in turnout**

From a normative perspective whether or not a citizen casts a ballot at election time is potentially important in establishing political transparency and democratic legitimacy. Empirical research indicates that different groups in society vote at different rates and prefer different policies. Thus, if for example those with high incomes vote at a higher rate than those with low incomes, the policies favoured by the higher income group should hold more influence over parties and candidates seeking election.

In such a situation declining rates of voter turnout undermine the normative principles of transparency and legitimacy in a liberal democratic polity. This kind of analysis has led to a proposal to make voting compulsory being put forward in an American Political Science Association presidential address (Lijphart 1997: 4). Voting determines who are elected and those elected determine public policy. Marginalised groups can only have political influence if they vote. Therefore, voter turnout is important because it is a key factor in explaining electoral outcomes and subsequent government policy making.

If one accepts the assumption that voters and non-voters have different characteristic what would happen if there was universal turnout? Very little counterfactual research of this kind has been undertaken outside of the United States. DeNardo (1980; 1986) argued that higher turnout helped the Democratic Party in presidential, congressional, senatorial and gubernatorial elections – but only some of the time. A second line of research based on the assumption that all citizens vote and hence making comparisons with mass surveys found that in presidential elections after 1972 there was no significant partisan effect. Voters were seen to represent citizens with some variation between elections (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980: 109ff; Teixeira 1992: 87ff; Abramson, Aldrich & Rohde 1998: 86-89; Schneider 1985). This variation between elections could of course be accounted for by net differences in the
profiles of marginal voters deciding to vote or abstain in a series of elections for a variety of voluntary and circumstantial reasons.

Criticism of these two lines of counterfactual research may be summarised in the argument that if non-voters (and marginal voters) were to decide to vote rather than abstain, they would be motivated to express (different) preferences on issues and candidates. The implicit assumption is that with partisan alienation, whole issue domains that would be of concern to non-voters if they voted remain untapped potential sources of political mobilisation. With universal turnout, issue domain lacunae become apparent and form the basis for a change in the overall pattern of political mobilisation.

The belief that voter turnout has important electoral and policy consequences may be summarised on the basis of Lijphart’s (1997) arguments in favour of making voter participation compulsory in order to reduce inequality. Lijphart’s Unequal Participation contentions are listed below in the form of six hypotheses.

H1. Core voters as a group tend to be more conservative than all citizens on issues relating to morality, economic redistribution and individual freedom.
H2. Core voters, marginal voters and non-voters all express preferences on the basis of partisanship, ideology and specific issues. Marginal and non-voters tend to have preferences of lower intensity than core voters.
H3. Core voters tend to have higher incomes than marginal and non-voters.
H4. Non-voters and marginal voters have an underdeveloped sense of class-consciousness.
H5. Non-voters and marginal voters are not politically mobilised during election campaigns, i.e. canvassed by telephone or contacted by party activists.
H6. A majority of non-voters and marginal voters share similar demographic characteristics, e.g. young age, residentially mobile and low education.

All of these hypotheses have been tested in the United States by Highton & Wolfinger (2001: 118) who found that “Non-voters do differ from voters in the directions predicted [by Lijphart (1997)]. They are less likely to have opinions on issues,
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identify with a party, express an ideological preference, be class conscious, or be stimulated by campaign activists. Yet, except for the last point, the differences are generally trivial”. No similar exercise has been undertaken in Europe.

**Partcom-multilevel project – new data & new research design**

The principal reason, for adopting a multi-level strategy is that the problem of electoral participation varies across levels of governance. (The concept of “levels” of governance involves a horizontal and a vertical dimension – the horizontal dimension comprises sub-national, national and supranational governance; the vertical dimension distinguishes between presidential, legislative, parliamentary and plebiscitary poles of governance). Previous research has tended to concentrate on the national level or, at most, to extend one step beyond this (either in a sub-national or in a supranational direction) (see figure 2).

<<< Figure 2, about here >>>

These piecemeal approaches have failed to exploit the veritable laboratory for the analysis of electoral participation constituted by the full range of multi-level governance and, in doing so, have lost major analytical leverage. This has meant, for example, that the dominant analytical model in the field (the second-order election model) has only been subjected to very partial testing. Finally, the principle of subsidiarity reinforces the decision to pursue a multi-level research strategy. Implicitly or explicitly guided by this principle, the European integration project has for quite some time been strongly committed to the participation and involvement of citizens at the sub-national level and has done much to nurture institutions and processes of devolved decision-making at such levels. This aspect of European integration underlines the need for research on democratic participation that goes beyond the national level to include both the supranational and subnational levels.

The main objective of the multi-level project is to explain differences in voter turnout cross-nationally, at different levels of governance, over time. Quite often research on voter turnout has focussed on a single country at a single time point or over time. Due mainly to data constraints, there is considerably less research looking
Democratic participation in systems of multi-level governance

at many countries comparatively over time. Moreover, such cross-country and cross-time research as exists has almost always focussed on specific types or levels of elections, i.e. national or European. Inevitably, such research has focused on national elections as the most important type of election for democratic representation and there is as a result little or no comparative research that looks at different types of elections.

In fact, the main explanation of supra-national European elections, the so-called “second-order theory” builds on the idea that elections at the European level are in fact determined by considerations at the (more important) national level. One of the alleged consequences is that European elections have lower turnout.

The assumption that differential rates of voter abstention are connected to voters’ evaluations of an election’s importance places a relatively high informational demand on voters in terms of awareness of institutional provisions, of the current political situation and of the perceived signals that political elites will receive from the outcome of non-national elections. However, if citizens are simply not aware of these factors, as much of the empirical evidence indicates they are not, then the decision of whether or not to vote is based on a mix of general factors relating to voting behaviour in all elections and specific factors relating to particular features of sub- and supra-national elections.

Analyses of lower turnout at mid-term congressional elections, and at European, local, regional and municipal elections suggest that voters do not necessarily rank different election types on the basis of perceived importance, nor do they necessarily treat each election type separately. On the other hand different election types are connected to each other in the minds of voters. The published research on turnout has never fully explored or explained this relationship. Analysing citizens’ voting behaviour across a wide span of countries, time-points and types of election will make it possible to get a more realistic picture of the decisions that citizens face on election day, starting with the decision on whether or not to go to the polls. In pursuing this objective the Partcom-multilevel projects employs both aggregate and individual level data. In practical terms, aggregate voting data is matched with census data at the lowest sub-national political unit feasible in seven countries. With such data it is possible to use not only regression techniques but also undertake ecological inference estimations. Individual level data will be based on a number of mass surveys.
undertaken for various types of elections where a variety of regression techniques will be used to test a variety of hypotheses taken from the literature reviewed in this report.

Select Bibliography of Voter Turnout Literature

General


Democratic participation in systems of multi-level governance


Cross-National Research on Voter Turnout


Democratic participation in systems of multi-level governance


Democratic participation in systems of multi-level governance


**European Parliament Elections**


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Figure 1, ‘Concentric circle’ typology of electoral participation

Note, derived from Sigelman & Jewell (1986). ‘Regular voters’ always vote; ‘Irregular voters’ vote infrequently; ‘Non-voters’ refuse to vote although registered; ‘Unregistered voters’ are not allowed to vote; ‘Non-citizens’ are most often not entitled to vote.
Figure 2, Typology of areas electoral participation in systems of multi-level governance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of governance</th>
<th>Pole of governance – where decision making power is located</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indirectly elected executive answerable to a parliamentary assembly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Factors used to explain voter turnout as a proportion of the voting age population at the aggregate level in comparative perspective over time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Literature source (see notes below)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mobilisation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of changes in executive x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party-group linkages X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarisation (1) x X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmaterialist party       x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote-seat difference of two largest parties x X X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in labour Party vote share X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in Union density X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N parties in legislature (4) x X X X (log)X X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisiveness (3) X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First party-second party x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One party majority government X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life satisfaction x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levels of trust x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political discussion rates x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New voters (11) X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory voting X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disproportionality [10] X X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disproportionality * PR X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral system (dummies) (2) X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting age x x X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffrage change x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National competition, districts (5) x X X (X)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncameralism (6) X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postal voting X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday voting X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number polling days X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary voter registration [X] X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illiteracy X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop density X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNP % (log)X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income % [change] X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflation x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social security spending as %GDP x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social security*income X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending on education x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP-change on previous year X x X x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP change on previous election x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socio-demographic</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age [% over 34] [X]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in VAP X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in VAP (30-69yrs) X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Democratic participation in systems of multi-level governance

Sources:

Legend:
X – statistically significant factor; x – not a statistically significant factor

Notes:
1. Castles & Mair (EJPR; 1994) expert survey data: distance between the extreme parties.
2. PR, plurality, majority, mixed systems.
3. Is election highest, and if not, was election coterminous with highest.
4. Most to the literature uses the effective number of parties. However, Blais (1998) found after considerable analysis that this formulation works best.
5. Really ordered and grouped, constant size
7. Also show results from fixed effects and simple pooled model, following suggestion of Radcliff (1992). Include lagged turnout in his model.
8. This analysis and the article it is a rejoinder to the use of lagged turnout as an independent variable, which can attenuate the effects of the other explanatory factors (see, Achen 2000). Jackman concludes time series data raises real questions about the importance of institutions.
9. This deals with all elections in Mackie & Rose- but only investigated only institutional variables. Results superseded by Blais (1998).
10. Found disproportionality only significant post 1945, not before.
11. Increase in enfranchisement
Table 2, Overview of factors affecting voter turnout in national or parliamentary elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor affecting electoral participation</th>
<th>Increase turnout</th>
<th>Decrease turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voted in previous election (Grofman 1993; Green &amp; Shachar 2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic &amp; political involvement (Putnam 2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory voting (Lipshart 1997; Franklin 1999)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low barriers to voter registration (Kim, Petrocik et al. 1973; Wolfinger &amp; Rosenstone 1978, 1980)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election day registration (Rhine 1995)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absentee balloting allowed (Oliver 1996)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early voting (Stein 1998)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postal voting (Magleby 1987; Berinsky, Burns &amp; Traugott 2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet voting (Solop 2000; Alvarez &amp; Nagler 2000; Norris 2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding elections at the weekend / holidays (Franklin 1996)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-canvassing (Gerber &amp; Green 1999, 2000b)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct mail canvassing (Gerber &amp; Green 2000b)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaflet campaign (Gerber &amp; Green 2000a)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportional electoral system (Blais &amp; Carty 1990)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linkages between social groups &amp; political parties in addition to party competition (excluding compulsory voting) (Powell 1980, 1987)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political competition or high intensity contests resulting from social or ideological cleavages between parties increase turnout (Powell 1980)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased volume of political mobilisation (Rosenstone &amp; Hansen 1993)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party polarisation and an increasingly postmaterialist electorate (Markus &amp; Crepaz 1990)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected majority of the front running candidate is small (Downs 1957; Ferejohn &amp; Fiorina 1975; Grofman 1983)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen participation has increased in more policy oriented and less organised arenas such as referenda (Butler &amp; Ranney 1981)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The activity of citizen groups, single-issue groups, etc. has increased leading to increased voter participation (Barnes &amp; Kaase 1979; Jennings &amp; van Deth 1990; Ginsberg &amp; Shefter 1990)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of campaign contact (Rosenstone &amp; Hansen 1993)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing rate of voter overreporting in NES (Burden 2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political mobilisation (Gosnell 1927; Caldeira, Patterson et al. 1985)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural incentives, e.g. number of party choices and type of legislative power influence turnout (Jackman 1987)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter turnout variation is cyclical (Nardulli, Dlager et al. 1996)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual factors for specific elections &amp; variations in personal circumstances (Sigelman &amp; Jewell 1986; Berinsky, Burns &amp; Traugott 2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of prevailing economic conditions (Southwell 1996)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased level of information to voters (Sanders 1996, 2001; Diermeier &amp; van Mieghem 2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad weather on election day (Laver 1997)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The changing nature of the relationship between the individual and the mass media which has altered the nature of political campaigns and political participation (Semenko et al. 1991; Miller 1990)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent voting in municipal, local, regional, state elections &amp; referenda (Powell 1982; see also,Crewe 1981)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The increasing heterogeneity of public issues – leading it has been suggested in some cases to distinct issue publics (note, the influence here of schema theory within public opinion research (Budge &amp; Fairlie 1983; Franklin 1992).</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasingly inaccurate measure of voting age population (McDonald &amp; Popkin 2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline in partisanship and perceptions of government responsiveness (Abramson &amp; Aldrich 1982)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generational replacement (Miller &amp; Shanks 1996)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3, Factors used to explain voter turnout in European Parliament elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggregate analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual level analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Institutional factors**

- Compulsory voting: + X X* X X X
- Simultaneous elections: + X X X X
- Weekend voting: + X X X X
- Country net contributor: - X
- Country net beneficiary: + X
- Strict party lists: - X
- First elections in EU: + X
- Share of seats in EP: + X
- Multiple constituencies: + X
- Proportionality: + X X
- Election timing: +/- X

**Demographics**

- Age < 25: - X X X
- Age 26 - 35: - X X X
- Religion: + X X
- Education: + X

**General attitudes**

- Party attachment: + X X X
- Interest in politics: + X X X
- Informed on national politics: + X
- Left-Right: + X
- Importance of election: + X† X

**Attitudes toward EU**

- Public support for EU: + X
- Pro-EU: + X
- EU involvement: + X
- EU knowledge: + X
- EP reliability: + X
- Euro party difference: + X
- Euro candidate difference: + X

**Notes:**

* Used as a interaction variable with political interest, campaign mobilisation and appeal of best choice.
† The importance of the European election was judged in terms of timing, i.e. the interval between two adjacent national elections.