

The Voter Turnout Puzzles

by

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Abstract

The study of voter turnout is bedeviled by a number of puzzles, some of which also are found in other areas of political research. Other topics, however, seldom see so many apparently intractable puzzles all at the same time. In this article I enumerate the puzzles and describe each of them briefly. My argument is that in studying voter turnout we need to solve most if not all of these puzzles in order to make progress on the more fundamental questions of why turnout is declining in established democracies and whether this decline matters.

Introduction

Voter turnout is a hot topic. Seemingly whenever an election is held, the question comes up: how many people turned out to vote? Sometimes the turnout is unexpectedly high. Commentators were amazed at the number of people who stood in the hot African sun hour after hour waiting to vote in South Africa's first truly free and universal election. More often they express surprise at the fact that turnout is lower than expected – so much more often, indeed, that one might be forgiven for supposing that low or declining turnout was ubiquitous in contemporary democratic elections. One prosaic reason for this is the newsworthiness of turnout decline. Stable turnout is not news.

Moderately increased turnout is not news. Low or declining turnout is newsworthy. So commentators draw attention to the level of turnout mainly when it is low or declining. How many people are aware that turnout was higher at the American presidential election of November 2000 than at the previous presidential election, in 1996? Of course, the level of turnout in the more recent of those elections was overshadowed by its other, more newsworthy, features – butterfly ballots and such. But the lack of press attention given to increased turnout, when it occurs, is one reason why we have this general perception that turnout everywhere is in decline. What is true is that whenever turnout does decline the decline makes news.

The reason why declining turnout makes news seems to be because it allows commentators to pontificate about the dire state of democracy in the country concerned. Low electoral turnout is often considered to be bad for democracy, whether inherently or because it calls legitimacy into question or because low turnout implies lack of representation of certain groups and inequalitarian policies (Piven and Cloward, 1977; Teixeira, 1992). Above all, low turnout appears to be seen by commentators as calling into question the civic-mindedness of a country's citizens and their commitment to democratic norms and duties. Indeed, declining turnout is often seen as a mark of disengagement, if not actual disaffection (Teixeira 1992; Dalton 2000).

That turnout should be a mark of civic virtue is not self-evident. In the early days of empirical social enquiry, those who studied turnout (Merriam and Gosnell 1924; Gosnell 1927; Boechel 1928; Tingsten 1937) took it for granted that turnout would be higher when an election's outcome hung in the balance and when "issues of vital concern are presented" (Boechel 1928: 517). Seen in this light, low voter turnout would be blamed on parties and politicians for failing to present issues of vital concern – or for failing to present such issues in an election where the outcome was seen as likely to determine the course of public policy. Thus low voter turnout would have been blamed on the character of the election, not on the characters on those who failed to vote.

It was the rational choice approach to explaining political behavior that changed our ideas about why people vote. Writing in 1967, Riker and Ordershook pointed out that the chances of any one vote affecting the outcome of an election for nation-wide public office were vanishingly small – even in a close race. For this reason, they went on to argue, people (unless they had quite unreasonable expectations about the importance of their vote) could not be voting with the purpose of gaining material benefits (Riker and Ordershook 1968:28). Whatever the benefits any individual might receive as a consequence of policies adopted or blocked by an election's outcome, those benefits would be enjoyed whether the individual voted or not. So the only rational reason for an individual to vote would be in order to gain non-material benefits, such as the satisfaction of pulling one's weight and other aspects of civic virtue.

In the light of this argument, those who studied electoral participation in the years that followed paid little attention to benefits that might accrue to voters from the outcome of any specific electoral contest. Instead they focused on voting as a habit that people learned during their formative years – a learning experience dominated by education and social status.¹ In their seminal

¹ The dominance of education and social status has not been found ubiquitously outside the United States (see below).

work on *Participation in America*, Verba and Nie (1971) built their explanation of electoral participation on what they called a 'baseline model' consisting of income, occupation and education. This baseline model (later renamed the 'resource model') dominated explanations of individual turnout decisions in the United States and elsewhere until the present time (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Parry, Moiser and Day 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). In recent research the resource model has been joined by a 'mobilization model' that takes account of the fact that people also vote because they are mobilized to do so by parties, interest groups and candidates (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). But in all this work the focus for explaining why people vote is centered on the individual and things that happen to the individual rather than (as in earlier research) on the election and things about the election. In the light of this focus, it is not surprising that commentators should take low or declining turnout to be a reflection on the capacity and motivation of individual citizens.

Yet the idea that declining turnout is due uniquely to 'something about citizens' runs counter to some very obvious facts. In the first place, turnout varies from election to election both up and down; and while it is possible to imagine secular trends in civic virtue, it is hard to imagine what would cause it to fluctuate both up and down from election to election. Moreover, if it was civic virtue that drove turnout, why does virtue have more effect in some elections (US presidential elections, for example) than in others (US midterm elections, for example)? The same citizens vote in a presidential election who fail to vote at the following midterm election. Presumably it is not something about those citizens that makes them more likely to vote in certain elections than in others.

In the second place turnout varies enormously between countries. There are countries (like Australia, Belgium and Malta) where virtually everyone votes. If high turnout is due to 'something about citizens' then how come the citizens of Australia, Belgium and Malta are so different from the

citizens of the United States and Switzerland (where turnout in national elections is particularly low)? It is true that in Australia and Belgium voting is compulsory, but the law that makes abstention illegal does not change the character of those countries' citizens. On the contrary, what it affects is the character of elections in those countries; and, if compulsory voting can affect voter turnout, then perhaps other things about the character of elections can also affect voter turnout. Voting is not compulsory in Malta, so (unless we want to assume that Maltese citizens are uniquely civic-minded) it seems clear that there must be at least one other feature of elections' character that can bring about universal turnout – or perhaps a combination of several features.

The purpose of this paper is to set out in detail these and other puzzles that bedevil the study of voter turnout. The rationale for doing so is the observation that only if we understand the problems are we in any position to identify solutions. The puzzles come in two major varieties. The first are puzzles about voter turnout itself; among them why do people bother to vote at all, why is turnout so relatively stable over time, why does it decline when it does, and why (in some countries) does it not decline at all – or even rise? The second variety of puzzles have to do with how to study voter turnout. For example, is turnout an aggregate-level or individual-level phenomenon? Can we understand it best by studying turnout change over time, by studying differences in turnout between countries, or by studying why some individuals vote while others do not? How do we take account of the fact that turnout varies more among new cohorts and less among more established cohorts?

In this paper we take these and other puzzles one at a time, and use the process of going through them as an opportunity to set out not only the puzzles themselves but also the major approaches that have been employed in past research for solving them.

Why so much turnout change – or why so little?

It has already been pointed out that turnout decline is not ubiquitous. Turnout did rise in the 2000 US

Presidential election, for example. Turnout also rose markedly in the German election of 1998, in the Norwegian election of 1997, in the Swedish election of 1994, and in the British election of 1992 (just to take another four recent cases of turnout increase that received little publicity). In emerging democracies turnout increases have been more common than declines in recent years (IDEA 1998; Norris, 2002). Even in established democracies, overall decline in turnout has not been exactly remarkable. As shown in Figure 1, the IDEA voter turnout project estimates that turnout in established

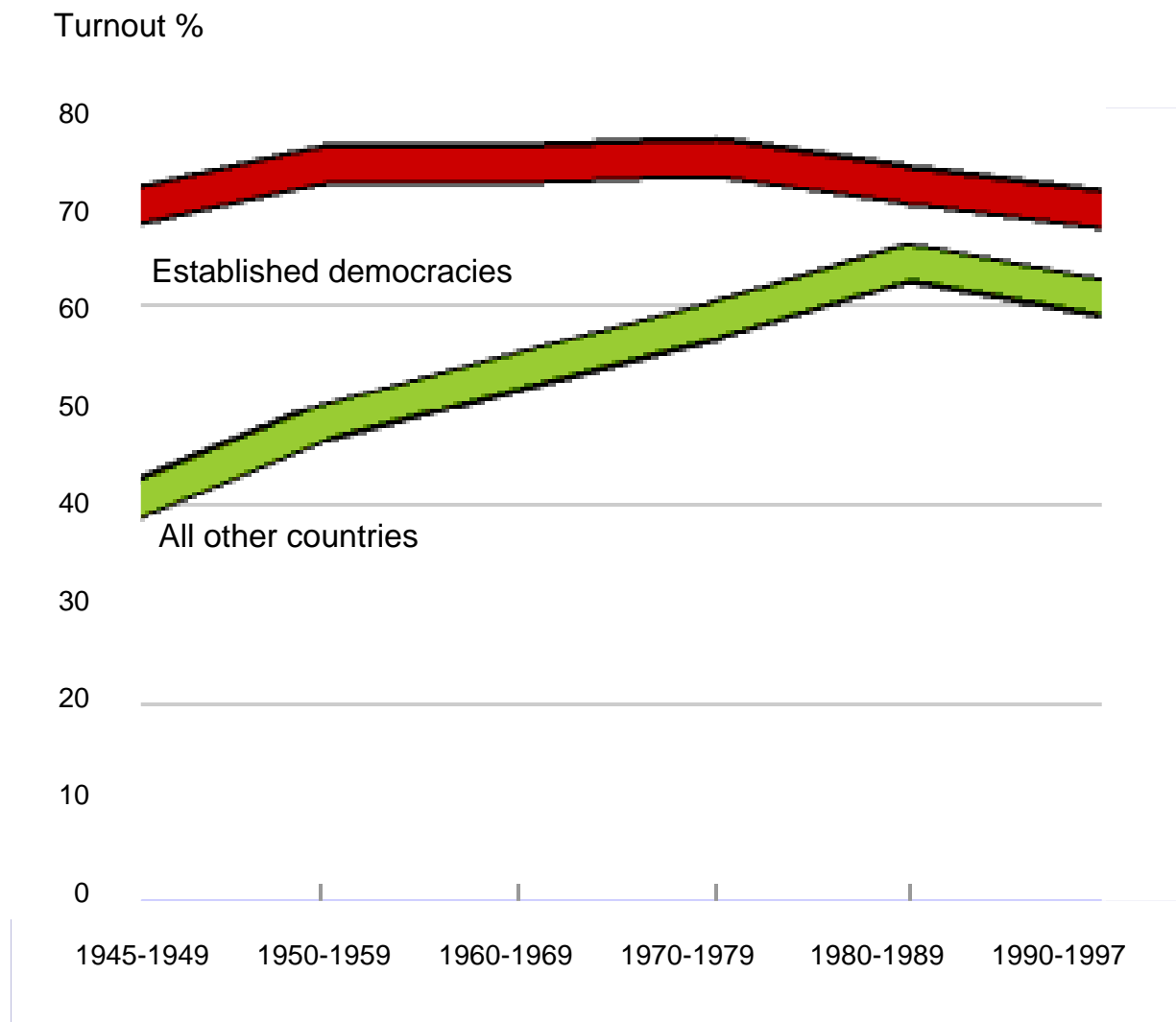


Figure 1 Average turnout in decades for 39 countries since 1945

Source: IDEA web site (<http://www.idea.int>)

democracies had declined by just 4 percent, on average, between the decade of the 1970s and the decade of the 1990s (though for the IDEA dataset the 1990s ended in 1997). This is not a big decline over a twenty-year period. More importantly, the associated election on election decline of less than half of one percent is almost imperceptible and well within sampling error. It would be hard to establish definitively by statistical methods the reasons for such a small decline.

Indeed, in the light of Figure 1, the question we should be asking is not why is turnout declining but why is turnout so stable? This question is reinforced if we look at the extent to which turnout has varied since 1945 in the 22 countries that have held elections continuously over this period (see Table 1). Most of them have seen turnout that has varied by no more than 5 percent from the mean for the

Table 1 Mean, standard deviation, trend , and standard error of estimate for turnout in 21 countries, 1945- 1999

country	mean(turnout)	sd(turnout)	Trend (b) *	SEE
Australia	94.591	1.842	+ 2.01	(1.33)
Austria	92.062	3.907	- 11.28	(1.79)
Belgium	92.611	1.712	+ 0.19	(1.42)
Canada	74.588	4.199	- 6.28	(3.44)
Denmark	85.591	2.520	+ 1.72	(1.88)
Finland	75.937	5.779	- 10.99	(3.87)
France	76.687	5.919	- 10.93	(3.94)
Germany	85.571	4.450	- 4.19	(4.28)
Iceland	89.476	1.988	- 3.24	(1.47)
Ireland	73.250	3.235	- 5.49	(2.64)
Israel	80.400	3.135	- 4.76	(2.53)
Italy	90.571	3.345	- 7.01	(2.29)
Japan	71.350	4.591	- 9.84	(2.80)
Luxembourg	89.833	1.992	- 5.72	(0.78)
Malta	88.214	8.719	+23.50	(3.19)
Netherlands	87.562	7.545	- 21.06	(3.53)
New Zealand	88.579	4.059	- 9.31	(2.24)
Norway	80.643	3.028	+ 1.28	(2.80)
Sweden	86.118	4.742	+ 7.79	(3.82)
Switzerland	56.643	11.050	- 34.74	(2.32)
UK	76.400	3.602	- 5.62	(3.00)
USA	53.923	4.941	- 10.68	(4.04)
Overall	81.391	4.377	- 4.95	(2.02)

Data from IDEA web site (<http://www.idea.iut>) and other sources.

* Trend is measured by a regression of turnout on time, where time is a continuous variable running from 0 in 1945 to 1 in 1999 and the trend of the best-fitting line is given by the slope (b).

period. Only in 6 countries (Finland, France, Malta, Netherlands, Switzerland and the United States) did turnout vary by as much as this – and these are all countries that saw marked trends (trends involving more than 10 percent change in turnout) over the period (upward in Malta, downward elsewhere). Even these six countries see turnout that seldom strays by as much as 5 percent from a linear trend describing their overall change in turnout during the period.²

The most plausible answer to the question why is turnout so stable ironically gives new weight to the small amount of turnout decline that is occurring. Turnout appears to be stable because, for most people, the propensity to vote is established relatively early in their adult lives. Voting, it has been suggested, is a habit; and those who find reason to vote in one of the first elections at which they are eligible generally continue to vote in subsequent elections, even less important ones. On the other hand, those who find no reason to vote in their first few elections generally continue not to vote in subsequent elections, even more important ones.³ This insight has been documented using data for the United States (Miller and Shanks, 1996; Putnam 2000; Plutzer 2002) and Canada (Blais, et al. 2001), but because it ties in so well with our understanding of other aspects of voting behavior (and because turnout stability is ubiquitous) we can be confident in asserting that the same thing will be found elsewhere.

The decision to vote, on this logic, would be like the decision to support a particular party. Just as support for political parties is established for most people early in adult life, so with turnout. Only in the earliest elections at which individuals are eligible to vote would there be any real question as to whether they will vote or not. This insight has a number of implications for our

² The Standard Error of Estimate in the final column is the range (plus or minus) within which expected turnout (expected on the basis of time elapsed since 1945) falls, two thirds of the time.

³ The story is somewhat more complex than this because citizens often undergo development during their first few elections, and many of those who did not vote in their initial election do learn the habit of voting shortly thereafter – what most researchers have called an age effect but which Plutzer (2002) refers to as a transition. Nevertheless, those who first vote in an election with low turnout do retain a distinctive pattern of lower turnout throughout their adult lives, as we shall see.

understanding of turnout variations, some of which go beyond anything that has been suggested in past research.

For one thing, the small turnout variations that we have documented within electorates taken as a whole must correspond to very much larger variations in the turnout of those who are recently eligible. More importantly, any sustained change in turnout (due to new voters voting at different rates than their predecessor cohorts) will have a cumulative effect as those new voters progressively come to make up a larger and larger portion of the electorate. If new cohorts are voting at lower rates than established cohorts then turnout will decline; and, even with no further drop in turnout among new voters, that decline will continue until the new rate of voting is reflected throughout the electorate – a development that could take as much as fifty years to run its course.

On this basis, a drop of 4 percent in 20 years will turn into a drop of 8 percent over the following 20 years and bottom out after a further 2 percent drop during the final ten years that it takes to replace an entire electorate: a ten percent drop overall. When we consider that the mean drop of 4 percent seen in Figure 1 (5 percent over the longer period encompassed by Table 1) is an average made up of countries in which turnout is rising as well as of countries in which turnout is falling, we have to conclude that turnout is in the process of a quite substantial long-term decline in many established democracies. Table 1 tells us that, in the fifteen countries with a negative trend in turnout, none have seen a turnout decline of less than 4 percent, which implies that all of these countries could see at least a ten point drop in turnout or over a fifty year period.

In the light of this logic we do need to confront the two questions that so often appear to excite those who comment on declining turnout. These are:

- 1) Why is turnout declining in so many established democracies?
- 2) Does it matter?

In order to address these questions we need to confront a number of further puzzles. Many of these are puzzles that bedevil all of political science research to a greater or lesser extent, but few other research topics confront so many puzzles all at the same time in the way that this topic does.

Change compared to what? Other countries or other times?

What should we compare when we compare turnout? Most commentators who decry declining turnout compare current with past turnout in the same country, and Bernard Groffman (1992) once argued in his aptly titled “Is Turnout the Paradox That Ate Rational Choice Theory?” that political scientists should emulate economists in focusing not on why the level of a variable is what it is, but rather on why it varies over time. This is an approach common in studies of turnout within individual countries but not in the comparative turnout literature, which has focused primarily on turnout differences between different countries. Those who have studied multiple elections in each of a number of countries generally used the additional time-points as replications of each country (what might be called quasi-countries) with the object of increasing their study’s N;⁴ but their focus was still on making comparisons between countries.⁵

Are comparisons between countries equivalent to comparisons over time? Most scholars implicitly assume that if they can identify factors that are associated with differences between countries, these same factors will account for why turnout changes over time. A country with low turnout is assumed to have the characteristics that a country with declining turnout is in the process of acquiring. But is this assumption reasonable? Does what we learn from comparing countries translate into an understanding of why turnout changes over time within one country?

⁴ Important exceptions are found in Gray and Caul (2000), and in Franklin (2002).

⁵ We do not address in this article the question of whether the comparisons should employ turnout as a percentage of the registered population or turnout as a percentage of the voting age population.

One important determinant of turnout across countries is weekend voting. Countries that go to the polls on Saturday or Sunday see higher turnout, to the extent of some 6 percent, than countries that go to the polls on weekdays (Franklin 1996; 2002). But when countries adopt weekend voting their turnout does not appear to increase, and nor does turnout appear to drop when they move to weekday voting (Franklin 2002). The same lack of consistency applies to the proportionality of electoral systems. Turnout appears to respond to differences in average proportionality between countries with a more proportional translation of votes into seats motivating more people to vote because there will be fewer individuals who feel their vote would be wasted. But changes in proportionality over time in the same country have no equivalent effect on turnout (Franklin 2002). Such inconsistencies are very puzzling, and any new basis for understanding the mainsprings of electoral participation should be able to explain them.

These observations make it clear that understanding the reasons why some people vote while others do not, or why some countries see higher turnout than others, will not necessarily tell us why turnout is declining or how to make it increase. Comparisons across space and individuals may be the only way certain research questions can be answered, but the answers we get are not necessarily the answers we want; and in turnout studies we do not need to adopt this approach. We need to compare people and countries when we lack information about change, but when studying turnout we have no such lack. If, for example, we want to know whether introducing weekend voting will cause turnout to increase, we arguably get more appropriate evidence from examining countries that have changed the day upon which they hold elections than from examining a set of countries that vote on different days.⁶ If such changes are not associated with change in turnout, then any cross-country association between

⁶ If countries were to prove themselves responsive to different variables, or to the same variables in different ways, then of course we would be interested in these country differences.

rest day voting and turnout must be spurious or contingent.⁷ The same applies to other potential independent variables.

Something about societies or something about people?

While voting is a matter of individual decisions, turnout is an aggregate-level phenomenon. It is a feature of an electorate not a voter. And, while it is true that electorates are made up of aggregates of voters, the process of aggregation is not simply one of adding up relevant features of the individuals who form part of it. An electorate is not just a voter writ large any more than an economy is a consumer writ large. Yet most of the work on what makes people vote has been conducted at the individual level. We know from survey research that the factors most strongly associated with the likelihood that someone will vote are their age (young people are less likely to turn out), their education (those with a college education are more likely to vote, especially in the United States), and the extent to which they are embedded in social structures (people who are members of churches, unions and other organizations are more likely to vote; loners are less likely to do so). The three variables are connected in the theory that underpins this research because membership in organizations makes people easier to mobilize (Rosenstone and Hanson 1993), education serves to inculcate civic virtue and various skills that can make electoral participation easier (Lipset 1960), and age governs the opportunities people have had to receive an education and to become embedded in social structures (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995).

When we take the aggregate view, however, we need to concern ourselves with the precise manner in which individual-level effects are aggregated, a concern that has not been prominent in past theorizing. The idea that resources and mobilization affect turnout leads to the idea that turnout

⁷ A contingent relationship might occur when certain cultural pre-requisites are needed for variables to have the expected effect (some call this path dependency). One reason for focusing on established democracies is to reduce the likelihood of path dependent effects; but, in any case, such effects cannot be responsible for turnout change in one country.

depends on the social makeup of a society – the proportion of the population falling into different age-groups, having different levels of education, or having strong links to social groups – with a more highly educated population, for example, being one that should demonstrate higher turnout. But the social makeup of society does not pertain directly to the voting act, and attempting to derive aggregate-level implications for turnout is not straightforward.

For one thing, there is a mechanical problem arising from the fact that quite large changes in the structure of the population do not necessarily have important effects on turnout in established democracies.⁸ Again taking education as our example, if we were to see a doubling of the proportion of the college age population engaged in higher education in some country (from, say, 10 percent to 20 percent) over the course of twenty years, this would represent an investment in higher education at the limit of the capacity of any country, even a rich one. But what would be the effect on turnout? The most generous estimate of the effect of higher education in established democracies is that college-educated individuals in the United States are some 16 percent more likely to vote than those with no college education (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). On average, over 22 countries, the effect found by Franklin (1996, 2002) was more like 12 percent. For ease of computation let us take it to be 15 percent. A 15 point increase in turnout among 10 percent of the population is a 1.5 percent increase overall. But note that this increase takes twenty years to accomplish. More importantly, the full effect of the reform will not be felt until the new proportion of college educated is reflected throughout the population; and that will take a further fifty years or more, until the last of those educated before the reform leaves the electorate. A 1.5 percent rise in turnout over a seventy-year period would certainly be swamped by other changes and would likely

⁸ We would have different expectations if we were dealing with emerging democracies, since social differences there are more stark. Being able to read, for example, makes a difference to turnout in a way in which university education does not. Norris (2002) finds ceiling effects in the links between social characteristics and turnout, such that many relationships tail off in established democracies. So it is important to look separately at the two groups of countries.

be impossible to detect, even in a properly specified model of turnout change.

Certain demographic changes (for example in the age structure of the population) might take effect more immediately, as we shall see. However, problems similar to those regarding education arise when we attempt to aggregate many other measures of individual-level resources, or measures of people's susceptibility to mobilizing efforts.⁹ Proponents of the resource and mobilization models of turnout change have not addressed these problems. Instead they argue by analogy with the individual level – an analogy that may not hold.¹⁰ But the role of education and other resource variables in explaining the decision to vote is put into question in other ways as well.

How do we know when an association is causal?

The contrast between low turnout in Switzerland and the United States and high turnout in Malta is curious for a reason that goes beyond putting into question the primacy of civic virtue in explaining why people vote. It also puts into question the role of education in inculcating that civic virtue. This is because, while Switzerland and the United States are countries with among the most highly educated populations on earth, Malta did not even have a university until the 1990s. This question about the role of education is reinforced when we consider the fact that most countries have seen a huge expansion of secondary and tertiary education since the 1960s – precisely the period during which turnout has declined in many of these countries (see below). Over the 22 countries that have

⁹ For example, changes in union membership, such as the reduction of 50% that occurred in the United States in the forty years after 1960, would also have had rather small effects on turnout. Even in the 1960s, union members made up less than 20 percent of the voting age population and were only some 4 percent more likely to vote (according to a recent analysis by Gray and Caul, 2000). This implies less than a 1 percent change in turnout for the voting population as a whole over a forty-year period. Outside the United States, union density has declined less – by under 2 percent on average across 18 advanced democracies, according to Gray and Caul, so this is not likely to be a variable that could account for widespread turnout decline.

¹⁰ It is as though an economist were to argue that, since few of those with college degrees are unemployed, we can solve a country's unemployment problem by educating everyone to the college level. The experience of countries like India and Egypt with high proportions of unemployed graduates tells us that there is no aggregate-level counterpart to the individual-level relationship. Why should it be any different with turnout?

held elections continuously since the end of World War II, the correlation between the proportion of the population with a university education and turnout is negative and highly significant at -0.36.

These anomalies call into question the causal primacy of education in determining turnout (cf. Brody 1978) – a primacy established firmly at the individual level, at least in the United States. This primacy is also called into question by the failure to find a similar role for education in many other countries (Verba, Nie and Kim 1977; Topf 1995). There is no doubt about the individual-level link between education and electoral participation in the United States, but perhaps we make a faulty inference when we assume that more education leads to higher turnout.

Just because some factor is associated with electoral participation does not mean that the association is causal. Suppose education is not itself the cause of voter turnout. Suppose that education is simply one of the indicators of an enquiring mind. Perhaps people are more likely to vote who take an interest in the world around them and perhaps such people are also more likely to pursue an extended education. On this view, the number of people with higher education is a function of higher education provision, and the more opportunities there are for people to become educated the more educated people there will be. Interest in politics, however, could be quite unaffected by whether there are more or fewer university places. Yet education will correlate with turnout because politically motivated people will be the ones who pursue a higher education when the opportunity is presented, and these are also the people who vote. Indeed, the generally assumed causal connection between education and interest in politics might at times actually be reversed, if some people have been motivated to acquire a higher education because of increased political consciousness. A similar argument could be made with regard to other resources.

If the association between education and turnout is not causal, this would explain why many countries can have high turnout despite having much less well educated populations than the United

States or Switzerland. It would also explain why the United States and Switzerland themselves have had higher turnout in past years when they had less well-educated populations.¹¹

Two faces of socialization

Those who have tried to explain why people vote on the basis of learned patterns of behavior stress the socializing influences of family and school. But socialization is a tricky concept. The idea that people are socialized into certain patterns of behavior at a young age is generally thought of as having to do with early training. Parents and teachers are seen to be trying to get children to behave in certain ways, and the fact that those children grow up to be decent citizens is often thought to reflect the success of that training. Certainly, when new behavior patterns, seen as undesirable, arise among young adults, the blame is often placed on lax parental and school training. Yet the origins of the notion of socialization, in the work of the first Yale professor of sociology William Graham Sumner, lie not in training but in the desire to conform (Sumner 1906). Indeed, the desire of children to conform their behavior to that of other children is often easier to observe than the effects of parental training. What probably happens in fact is that a child's first reference group is his or her parents, and she starts by conforming her behavior to theirs. Later the child's reference group becomes the children he or she meets outside the home, and her behavior changes with the identity of those to whose behavior she is trying to conform.¹²

Political behavior evidently has much in common with other types of behavior, and individuals are held to learn their political orientations from the orientations of those around them.

¹¹ The correlation between university education and turnout over the period since 1945 is -0.68 in the United States and -0.96 in Switzerland.

¹² Seen in this way, the declining ability of the family to govern the behavior of children will have nothing to do with the effectiveness or otherwise of parental efforts at training them and everything to do with the decline in the sizes of families and the increasing amount of leisure time for children who thus find both the need and the means to gain companionship elsewhere.

The decline of class voting (Franklin 1985) or, more generally, the decline of cleavage politics (Franklin 1992) had much to do with individual mobility and the declining importance of face-to-face communications in the modern world. These developments have given individuals increasing freedom to find and change the reference groups to which they conform their voting behavior (van der Eijk, et al. 1992).

But there is another component to socialization, and one that it is important to bear in mind when trying to understand the failure of certain individuals to conform to changing patterns. This is the fact that people get set in their ways. The longer some pattern of behavior has been pursued the harder it is to change. The reason why children are so susceptible to new influences is that they have not been alive long enough to get set in their ways.¹³ But the repeated reiteration of any particular pattern of behavior lays down ruts in a person's personality, making it harder and harder for that person to change the behavior concerned. This is why adults retain so many of the behavior patterns of their childhood, which in turn is why socialization is such an important concept. But note two critically important implications: (1) that ruts can be laid down at any age, not just in childhood, and (2) that the failure to repeatedly follow any particular behavior pattern implies the failure to lay down ruts. People who do not repeat the same behavior do not (in the language of Butler and Stokes, 1974) become 'immunized' against change. Butler and Stokes found that the magic number was three: anyone who had voted the same way three times had become essentially immune to the appeals of any other party. People who had switched their party allegiance more recently than three elections ago were much more likely to switch back again. Indeed, these authors found quite elderly respondents who were still not immunized against change, having repeatedly switched their party allegiances all through their lives. There were few such, however, because the mere happenstances

¹³ Indeed, the adaptability of children was probably an important survival trait for our species, allowing new generations to adapt to new circumstances.

of political fortune generally resulted in someone voting the same way three times at some point in their adult lives.¹⁴

The way in which we have presented socialization theory in the above paragraphs is in terms of rational behavior. People adopt a pattern of behavior as a rational response to circumstances (conforming with peer group pressure or responding to political arguments are both rational responses to circumstances). Over time responses may cease to be so rational, if people become immunized against further argument,¹⁵ but the behavior starts out from a rational point of origin. When we consider the decision to vote – to turn out in an election – we need a similar rational starting point. Theorists who tried to find a basis in socialization theory for the decision to vote – a basis that would explain why people vote when they supposedly gain no material benefits from doing so – ignored the fact that even socialized behavior rests on a basis of rational decision-making. How were people supposed to get stuck in the habit of voting if they had no basis for choosing whether to vote or not in the first place? One possibility is that parents would inculcate in their children the value of the voting act without reference to its instrumental benefits. But why should parents do this unless the voting act had value to them? *Socialization theory merely moves the point at which people decide whether or not to vote back in time from the current election to those elections at which individuals learned the habits of voting or of not voting. It does not provide an alternative basis for explaining the origins of those habits.*

¹⁴ Note that if we think of voting one way or another in a two-party system as a purely stochastic process, there is a 50% chance of voting the same way twice and a 25% chance of voting the same way three times in succession. Over a period of five elections there will have been two more opportunities of getting stuck in one's preferences, making three altogether, and the chances of being stuck will have become something like 75% (3 X 25%). Another three elections (making 8 in all) and being stuck will have become a virtual certainty, just on the basis of chance alone (in practice the probability never actually reaches 1.0). Taking into account the fact that most people start out with distinct party preferences, the length of time it takes to get stuck is generally much less than the period encompassed by eight elections, and most people are in fact immunized after three elections (Butler and Stokes 1974:).

¹⁵ Unless we consider immunization to be a rational response to the pressures of decision-making – economizing scarce decision-making resources by changing decision-based into rule-based behavior whenever possible and adopting 'standing decisions' to handle situations that arise repeatedly.

This brings us back to the contrast between individual-level behavior and the behavior of aggregate entities such as electorates. At the individual-level most of the individuals we study are immunized into their behavior patterns. If we want to understand those patterns we have to study the nature of the socialization process that they underwent. At the aggregate level, the importance of the socialization process is reduced to this: it ensures that change in the behavior of the aggregate entity will be slow not rapid. Turnout changes only gradually because most individuals have adopted a 'standing decision' to vote or not to vote, based on their early experiences of elections in their country. So turnout change depends on the behavior of new members of each electorate and the things that determine turnout change will be the things that impinge on these new electoral cohorts. Looking at elections cross-nationally, what distinguishes one country from another will not be the things that cause all those countries to see slow turnout change, but the things that determine the level at which new voters acquire the habit of voting as they come into each electorate. We will return to these matters below.

The role of mobilization

Meanwhile we still need to consider the role of mobilization. This is another concept that seems to explain turnout without the need to assume that voters are motivated by concerns about an election's outcome. After all, if voters are mobilized by party and group leaders, this means they are just responding to suggestions from those they respect or who have some hold over them. Or does it? Actually, in the modern world it is hard to imagine anyone being able to command the blind allegiance of followers to the point where they would vote just because they were encouraged to do so. Some reason would have to be given, and it seems likely that the reason given would relate to group advantage. Voting for a particular candidate would be good for the group because if that candidate wins she will favor the group whereas, if she loses, her opponent will favor someone else.

But in this case the mobilization effort is helping to explain to people that their votes have value – that the calculus of voting espoused by Riker and Ordeshook is incomplete. It is hard to see how the mobilization mechanism could in fact be independent of instrumental rationality. If mobilization is successful – as Rosenstone and Hanson (1993) tell us that it is – then this must be because voters see their votes as potentially bringing them the benefits that might flow from a favorable electoral outcome.

But the mobilization of electorates, if it occurs, reinforces the argument that people vote for instrumental reasons in another way also. Those who take the trouble to mobilize their supporters must want to win the election. If the outcome did not matter to them then they would not bother. But the outcome is likely to matter to those who do the mobilizing for exactly the same reasons that would make it matter to someone who was mobilized: an election that promises the possibility of policy change, especially if the contest is close-fought, will motivate the mobilization efforts of all of those who have the possibility of influencing others. Indeed, low turnout elections are often referred to as ‘low mobilization’ elections in recognition of precisely this mechanism. The declining importance of labor in the United States since the 1960s was not just due to the falling number of union members. It was also due to the fact that union leaders ceased to attempt to mobilize their members. In recent US elections unions have been a more important force, despite their smaller number of members, because union leaders have begun once again to attempt to mobilize those members. The question why union leaders should have stopped trying to mobilize their supporters thirty years ago and started doing so again today cannot be answered without producing a history of the US labor movement over the past thirty years. What can certainly be said is that it makes a big difference whether the attempt is made or not. Those who argue that the sizes of social groups (such as unions) will determine the level of turnout ignore the critical role of the leaders of those groups. In the United States, the decline of unionization indeed went along for many years with a decline in

the attempt to mobilize union members, but the recent change in this mobilizing behavior is independent of any increase in the size of the unionized US workforce.

Finally, we should ask, if the attempt is made to mobilize the members of some group, who will respond? On the basis of the socialization theory put forward earlier in this article it seems clear that those who will respond to a renewed call for union solidarity are union members who are also new voters – individuals who had not already gained the habit of voting before the long years of leadership neglect and who did not gain the habit of non-voting during those same long years when unions made no attempts to mobilize new members. So mobilization is not a separate route to electoral participation. It is a mechanism that works by way of both rationality and socialization.

In the end there is no escaping the fact that both rationality and socialization must play a role in turnout. In particular, the resource theory of turnout, while helping to distinguish between voters and non-voters in most countries, does little to help us understand turnout differences between countries or over time – at least in established democracies. The mobilization theory of turnout is more promising, but only because it is intertwined so closely with rationality and socialization – the two basic forces that govern all of voting behavior. Insofar as it is intertwined with those forces, mobilization becomes a route by which those forces have their effects, not a separate force in its own right and certainly not a substitute for rational action.

Individual-level change or change in the structure of society?

Although changes in the structure of society do need to be extensive in order to have measurable effects, major changes in political behavior have often resulted from changes in the composition of society. Though there is argument over whether the New Deal realignment in the United States was due to the mobilization of previously non-voting individuals or to changes in party allegiance by established voters (Anderson 1979; Campbell 1985 Erikson and Tedin 1986) there is no similar

question about the generational basis of the British realignment of 1945 (Butler and Stokes 1974; Franklin and Ladner 1995). And the decline of cleavage politics in most advanced industrial democracies appears to have been due primarily to the same phenomenon (Franklin 1992). Changes in social composition can lead to changes in aggregate behavior even when no individual citizen changes their behavior in any way.¹⁶ A number of changes have occurred in the composition of the electorates of established democracies which need to be taken into account in any analysis of turnout decline.

In the first place, the electorates of most countries have been swollen, starting in the late 1960s by the entry of the so-called 'baby boom' generation born after the Second World War.¹⁷ Because new voters turn out at lower rates than established voters, anything that increases the proportion of new voters will cause turnout to fall. At approximately the same time the voting age itself was lowered in many countries – generally from 21 to 18. These two events in conjunction had the effect of producing a newly enfranchised cohort that was double the size of previous cohorts in most countries, in turn doubling the contribution of new members of the electorate to turnout. Since (as was pointed out earlier) newly enfranchised voters are those largely responsible for turnout change, this provided the opportunity in many countries for an unusually large drop in turnout during the early 1970s. To the extent that (because of their younger ages) new cohorts lacked educational and membership characteristics of their predecessor cohorts (and to the extent that these features would be acquired with the passage of time) the drop would have been a temporary one. The large group of new voters would have eventually acquired the characteristics of their elders and turnout would have risen again to previous levels (cf. Topf, 1995). But this is a

¹⁶ Changes in the composition of the European Union appear to have been primarily responsible for turnout decline at European Parliament elections (Franklin 2001).

¹⁷ In several countries electorates were also swollen by the enfranchisement of women (in France immediately after the war, in Belgium in 1948 and in Switzerland in 1971).

process that could take fifty years to complete, and in the meantime turnout could drop progressively for a number of years before starting to recover. Back-of-the-envelope simulations suggest that if the size of the electorate under 40 years of age were to double over the course of 20 years (approximately what happened in most advanced democracies), this would cause a progressive fall in turnout of about 3 percent over that period, which would not start to rise significantly for another ten years. Lowering the voting age to 18 would increase the drop to about 4 percent and permanently increase the proportion of young voters in the electorate, thus limiting the extent of the eventual recovery.

Since we are now only 30 years from the point at which the baby boom generation reached voting age in most countries, we might be at the bottom of a cycle of drop and recovery of turnout in those countries.

This increase in the number of young voters will of course also increase the overall size of electorates, so it should come as no surprise that increases in the size of the electorate have been credited (Blais, 2000; Gray and Caul, 2000) with affecting turnout by bringing in new people who are harder to mobilize – whether because they are young or because they are newcomers to the society. Though these authors see electorate size as a variable bearing on electoral mobilization, their argument does not suffer from the same problems as other mobilization arguments because electorate size has a direct link to our measure of turnout: it constitutes the denominator in the calculation of that variable. Changes in electorate size must have immediate effects on turnout unless new voters vote at the same rate as existing voters.¹⁸

But any increase in the proportion of new voters contained in the electorate may well have an additional consequence if new voters, as has already been proposed, are so largely responsible

¹⁸ The variable will have a particularly marked effect when turnout is calculated on the basis of the voting age population, since immigration raises the denominator without having any possibility of raising the numerator commensurately (see Macdonald and Popkin, 2000).

for turnout change. An electorate with more new voters will be an electorate that is more responsive to anything that causes change. So changes in the character of elections may have become more potent in effecting turnout change just because contemporary electorates contain a larger proportion of those who are responsive to such changes.

Of course, the classic rational choice basis for understanding the motivation to vote, as put forward by Riker and Ordeshook (1967) and serving as the basis for most research at the individual level as already explained, would deny that ‘other factors’ can influence voter motivations, whether in interaction with the proportion of new voters or directly. But we have already indicated that we have strong reservations about the classic rational choice basis for understanding voter motivations, and it is to these reservations that we now turn.

Something about people’s characteristics or something about their motivations?

Just as important as the fact that individual-level effects on turnout in established democracies, such as those of education, appear not to have counterparts at the aggregate level is the fact that aggregate-level research has found important effects on turnout that are not expected on the basis of rational choice theorizing and have not been identified in past individual-level studies – effects that arise from differences in the character of elections. It appears as though people react to these differences because they alter the instrumental benefits of voting, creating something of a paradox since (according to rational choice theory) people should not take account of instrumental benefits of voting. Such research builds on a tradition – associated with works by Merriam and Gosnell (1924) and Tingsten (1937) – that predates the survey-based individual-level research that we have been discussing, though that older literature has been updated by contemporary concerns (Powell 1980, 1986; Jackman 1987; Crepaz, 1990; Franklin 1996, 2002; Blais 2000; Norris 2002).

So the theoretical basis in individual rationality for asserting the importance of instrumental motivations is clouded by what has become known as the “turnout paradox.” But the very recognition of a turnout paradox (Groffman 1992) underlines the fact that people do vote in large numbers, defying one of the theory’s clear implications, while other implications that flow from assuming voter rationality do hold. No doubt theorists will one day resolve the paradox. Meanwhile it is enough to note that turnout varies as though in response to rational behavior – perhaps a form of aggregate rationality not readily amenable to Downs’ (1957) individualistic rational choice calculus that underpins Riker and Ordeshook’s argument (cf. Green and Schapiro, 1994).

Research in this tradition has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of institutional and political context. Citizens in some institutional settings vote at much higher rates than citizens in other settings. Indeed, Franklin (1996) showed how country differences had effects on turnout that were four times as great, on average, as individual-level differences. Country differences have two major components: institutional differences (which are largely set in the short term and can be thought of as defining the costs of voting – cf. Blais 2000) and political differences (which vary from election to election and can be thought of as defining the benefits of voting). Both of these sets of powerful effects put into question as no others have the notion that people vote primarily because of benefits that are independent of who wins or loses.

In some countries (notably the United States and Switzerland) institutional provisions make it impossible for legislative elections to directly affect the complexion (and hence the policies) of the executive; and turnout in US and Swiss legislative elections in recent years is always low. Elsewhere much depends on the current state of party competition, which can vary greatly from election to election. Of particular importance are the closeness of the race and the decisiveness of the election – the likelihood that it could result in a (different) single party majority government (Blais 2000; Franklin 2002). Close races that are liable to result in changes in government policy will

motivate both supporters and opponents of the government to vote, and will stimulate efforts to mobilize the undecided. Variables such as the closeness of the race and the decisiveness of the election could only affect the behavior of individuals who cared which party or candidate won.

Other research reinforcing this conclusion is research into strategic voting (Abramson, Aldrich, Paolini and Rohde 1992; Blais and Nadau 1996; Cain 1978; Niemi, Whitten and Franklin 1992). Such research has shown repeatedly that people behave as though their vote had instrumental value, not wishing to waste it on a candidate or party that had no hope of winning (even if that was their preferred party or candidate) when they could use it to further the chances of a party or candidate that did have a chance of winning (cf. Blais 2000).

So even while the importance of the resource and mobilization approaches were being confirmed at the individual level, the theoretical basis for trying to find non-instrumental explanations for voting and non-voting were being undermined at the aggregate level. Indeed, the relevance of the individual-level findings for understanding the level of turnout was also put into question. This is not to say that the individual-level findings are not real. On the contrary, those findings certainly have told us how we can distinguish between voters and non-voters – at least in America. What is not clear is whether they tell us anything about turnout at the aggregate level. In the analysis of turnout differences among established democracies, variables like education, occupation and income have not shown themselves able to play a significant role.¹⁹

Of course, the fact that the likelihood of voting is strongly affected by variations in individual resources by no means rules out a role for instrumental motivations. The problem is rather that there is no theoretical basis for assuming the existence of such motivations. This is why research at the individual level has not attempted to measure the impact of the character of elections on indivi-

¹⁹ In emerging democracies, education and income have sometimes served as indicators of economic and social development which has been shown to be linked to turnout (Blais 2000; Norris 2002).

dual voters. If the aggregate level findings are to be believed, variables indicating the changing character of elections should add to the individual-level variance that is currently explained by factors relating to resources and mobilization; and might perhaps replace some of those effects.

The relevant contest: local or national?

So far we have talked as though all elections were national events, but in some electoral systems the actual election that is participated in (or not) is a local event: an election that sends to the nation's legislature one representative (sometimes several) from a particular district or constituency. It is an open question to what extent in such elections the stimulus that voters respond to is national or local. If we assert (as we did above) that turnout variations can be due to 'something about elections' then which election is the one whose character will motivate voters? For example, the closeness of the race nationally has been found to motivate turnout (or the lack of it); but what about turnout in the local race? It is clear that people do pay attention to the local race, since much work on tactical voting has shown that people are aware of the character of the race in their local constituencies, even to the extent of voting for a different party if their own party has no chance locally, as already pointed out. Research on American congressional elections has shown that the number of uncontested seats and the average margin of victory have had strong effects on turnout in congressional elections since 1830 (Franklin and Evans 2000). Still, many people may not be aware of the specific circumstances in their local constituency, so the closeness of the race nationally may still be a source of turnout motivation even in countries with the sort of electoral system (a majoritarian or 'first past the post' electoral system) that makes the local race a relevant matter. In countries with proportional electoral systems of any type, the character of the local race should not be relevant since a major objective of such systems is to ensure that every vote counts irrespective of where it is cast.

Solving the turnout puzzles

The various puzzles outlined above between them stand in the way of progress in understanding the mainsprings of voter turnout. Making progress towards answering the fundamental questions of why turnout is declining and whether it matters require that we address and solve these puzzles. Trying to make progress on the fundamental questions without addressing the puzzles that bedevil them would be like trying to understand cosmology without having built a telescope. So the first items on the agenda for future research on voter turnout must be to solve the puzzles set out in this article.

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