



# Voting as a habit in new democracies – Evidence from Poland



Mikolaj Czesnik<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Marta Zerkowska-Balas<sup>b</sup>, Michal Kotnarowski<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland

<sup>b</sup> University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Poland

## ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*  
Available online 22 January 2013

*Keywords:*  
Voter turnout  
Habit  
New democracies

## ABSTRACT

Among the wide range of theories explaining why some people vote and others do not, one is recently gaining particular popularity. This is the theory of voting as a habit (e.g. Plutzer, 2002; Franklin, 2004; Hooghe, 2004). The empirical evidence supporting this theory covers only Western democracies, so the following question might be asked: is this pattern universal? In the case of old democracies, voting is a habit acquired gradually in a process which starts at the moment of the very first election one can cast the ballot. In new democracies the situation is different, as we can pinpoint the starting moment (first democratic election), which is the same for different voters and thus different age cohorts. In this paper we investigate voting as a habit in new democracies, using data from the Polish National Election Study. We find that voting in Poland has some habitual aspect; repeated voting brings about a (sort of) habit, which has an intrinsic, irreducible effect on voter turnout. We also find that habit of voting is formed likewise in all age cohorts.

© 2013 The Regents of the University of California. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Research concerning the habitual nature of voter turnout is of major importance for the theoretical discussions on political behavior. The habitual nature of voting, for instance, would be fundamentally at odds with assumptions of the rationality of political behavior (pure calculation of costs and benefits) underlying several theories in political science (i.e. Downs, 1957; Olson, 1965; Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974; Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989; Franklin, 2004). Similarly, it would underestimate the importance of resources necessary for political behavior (cf. Brady et al., 1995). A variety of studies, which tested empirically the theory of voting as a habit, have been recently conducted (cf. Green and Shachar, 2000; Plutzer, 2002; Gerber et al., 2003; Franklin, 2004; Owens, 2004; Aldrich et al., 2007; Cebula et al., 2008; Vandenbroek, 2008; Denny and Doyle, 2009). A vast majority of them present empirical evidence that voting is indeed partially a habit.<sup>1</sup> However, the empirical analyses supporting this theory cover only Western democracies. We lack relevant empirical evidence from new democracies. Therefore, the following questions remain to be analyzed: is this pattern universal? Is voting in new democracies a habit as well? In this paper, we aim to study these questions. We investigate voting as a habit in new democracies, which differ to Western democracies as far as the electoral context is concerned.

\* Corresponding author. Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland.

<sup>1</sup> Some critics are not quite convinced that habitual voting (an act repeated, at the very most, once every couple of years) indeed constitutes a habit in the narrow sense of the concept, as applied by psychologists. Undoubtedly, there are differences between habit of voting and other social and political habits, formed differently (actions are often repeated hundreds or thousands times). However, in the light of literature on voting as a habit, which is both theoretically conceivable and empirically convincing, we argue that it does make sense to talk about 'habit of voting'. We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this point.

In established democracies, voting as a habit is considered to be acquired gradually in a process starting at the moment of the very first election one can cast a ballot (cf. Plutzer, 2002). Consequently, age cohorts differ to the extent that the habit of voting is concerned (cf. Franklin, 2004). In new democracies the situation is different. We can pinpoint the starting moment (cf. Denny and Doyle, 2009: 19), which is the same for all voters clustered in different age cohorts. In other words, the first election after democratic transition affects all eligible citizens in the same way, no matter to which cohort they belong (the *tabula rasa* assumption put forward here is that previous political experiences, collected during the non-democratic period, are irrelevant for the process of voting habit formation). Thus, during the transition to democracy an interesting 'natural experiment' is taking place. We assume that in new democracies – like in established democracies – voting is a habit, but the path of acquiring it may not be the same.

Sometimes this *tabula rasa* approach is condemned. The main argument put forward relates to the very fact that citizens of democratizing countries do have certain political experiences, collected during communism (at least to the extent that they consumed policies and experienced their effects in their everyday lives). They also have certain 'electoral' experiences. Non-democratic regimes usually hold elections; in all Central–Eastern European communist countries elections were organized regularly. Moreover, they experienced high (almost universal) voter turnout. In Poland situation was slightly different than in other communist countries. In general, in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes electoral abstention is perceived as a mean and way of de-legitimacy of the system. The same was true for communist Poland. Moreover, non-voting was even more meaningful there, because the system was relatively liberal (in comparison to other communist regimes), and additionally there was a long tradition of civic disobedience, originating in the times of partitions (cf. Raciborski, 1989; Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, 1998; Czesnik, 2007).

It is an empirical question to what extent these previous experiences have an impact on voting behavior in democracy. Unfortunately, there are no rigorous, systematic studies addressing this issue; it is so primarily due to lack of relevant data.<sup>2</sup> However, scant empirical evidence (i.e. Kolarska-Bobinska et al., 1991; Bartkowski, 2003) shows rather perverse correlation – communist times 'non-voters' (those, who boycotted communist elections) are now electorally more active, while communist times 'voters' today tend to abstain.

We do not ignore the fact that there are studies showing the influence of past political experiences on voting behavior in new democracies (e.g. Heyns and Bialecki, 1991; Pacek, 1994; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Roper and Fesnic, 2003; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2011). These studies show that the communist past matters, that there is an impact of its legacies on post-communist attitudes and behavior. But to this point, no research has been conducted to examine whether turning out to vote under communism has an effect on participating in post-communist elections. It is so due to the lack of proper data in most cases; but most of the studies do not even address this question conceptually and theoretically. Consequently, as the studies mentioned above fail to find any direct and undeniable link between turning out to vote under communism and participating in post-communist elections, we disregard this element in our analysis and adopt the *tabula rasa* approach.

In addition, there are further strong theoretical arguments supporting the *tabula rasa* approach. Democratization in Central–Eastern Europe was undoubtedly a clinical exemplum of overwhelming social change. Some scholars (i.e. Sztompka, 2004) even dare to characterize the collapse of communism as a cultural trauma; so sudden and rapid, multidimensional, embracing all the spheres of human life. Therefore, though we lack systematic empirical evidence supporting this thesis, we argue that such a regime change entirely nullifies previous political experiences and minimizes their impact on present voting behavior.

Our research question requires good comparative data, ideally a cross-country panel study covering all the elections held during and after the transition to democracy period. Data of this sort do not exist. Thus, in order to test our hypotheses, we employ 'ordinary', post-election survey data. We use the Polish National Election Study (PNES)<sup>3</sup> from 1997. PNES 1997 is appropriate for our purposes as it contains measures of previous voting behavior. Moreover, Poland is an interesting case of a new democracy. As far as electoral behavior is concerned, it is by far the most volatile new democracies in the world (cf. Markowski, 2006; Jasiewicz, 2008; Millard, 2010). If we find that voting is a habit in Poland – despite its high electoral volatility – then it is plausible to assume that in other new democracies we should observe similar processes.

## 2. Voting as a habit: a literature overview

To analyze whether voting is a habit has recently become very popular in political science research (i.e. Verba and Nie, 1972; Miller and Schanks, 1996). Analyses are based on the assumption that newly enfranchised cohorts are less likely to turn out to vote than older cohorts. Age is one of variables which indisputably influences voter turnout (cf. Jennings, 1979; Strate et al., 1989; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Plutzer, 2002; Franklin, 2004; Phelps, 2004; Goerres, 2007). However, according to various researchers, this is not aging itself what increases one's propensity to vote, but changes in the life-cycle which 'affect motives, opportunities and resources' (Strate et al., 1989: 443) necessary to participate.

There are three main types of age effect on voter turnout: cohort effect, life-cycle and individual aging. It is widely known that various cohorts differ as far as the level of voter turnout is concerned. Firstly, these differences have their origins in

<sup>2</sup> We are for instance not aware of any survey that would ask simultaneously questions about electoral participation in communist and post-communist elections.

<sup>3</sup> This is a research project affiliated with the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, which covers the most important national-level electoral events in Poland. PNES collaborates with the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). The data are available in the public domain.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1046613>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1046613>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)