High turnout in the Low Countries: Partisan effects of the abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

We use a quasi-experimental framework to test the conventional wisdom that left-of-center parties benefit from higher turnout by analyzing the partisan effects of the abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands. Fixed effects, multilevel, and matching models of party family vote shares in the Netherlands before and after the reform—and in reference to a control group of Belgian party families—show consistent evidence the voting reform led to an increase in the vote share of Dutch social democratic parties and a decrease in the vote share won by minor and extreme parties. We find some evidence that Christian democratic and liberal parties also benefited from the voting reform, but argue this finding is not causally related to the reform itself.

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What are the partisan implications of variations in voter turnout? The question is an important one in the field of electoral research because it highlights the tension between normative ideals in political representation (Lijphart, 1997) and realist calculations that adjustments in electoral laws might benefit one party over another (Grofman and Lijphart, 1986; Rae, 1971). One prevailing sentiment in this literature is that parties on the left benefit from higher turnout. The abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands offers an unique opportunity to test the link between turnout and the vote shares of party families.

Voting was compulsory in the Netherlands between 1917 and 1970 (Irwin, 1974; Hirczy, 1994). The change in election law provides a quasi-experimental context to test if leftist parties win a larger share of the vote when turnout is higher.[1] The simultaneous abolition of compulsory voting throughout the Netherlands allows us to measure the average treatment effect relative to the pre-treatment period, but limits our ability establish a causal link between the reform and partisan vote shares. To overcome this characteristic of the Dutch case we incorporate electoral data from Belgium, a most similar case to the Netherlands that has mandated voting in elections continuously since 1893 (Robson, 1923, 572). If the truism linking turnout and the vote share won by the left is correct we should observe a decrease in the vote share of Dutch social democratic and other leftist parties in the post-reform period relative to other party families in the Netherlands or to the Belgian control case. That we observe the opposite trend—the vote share of social democratic parties actually *increased* following the abolition of compulsory voting—suggests the logic underlying the conventional wisdom is in need of reevaluation.

The outline of the paper is as follows. First, we review the literature on the partisan effects of turnout and address how this project contributes novel findings to the general knowledge. Second, we discuss the validity of our case selection, describe the data used in our analyses, and the methods we use to analyze these data. Third, we present our findings and address potential alternative

[1] The treatment condition is not randomly determined and thus this study is not a pure experimental design (Campbell and Stanley, 1963; Achen, 1986; Freedman et al., 2007).

explanations. Finally, we conclude with a few remarks about the relationship between turnout, vote share, and government formation in Belgium and the Netherlands.

1. Partisan effects of turnout

The decline in turnout in advanced industrial democracies has sparked a debate over the consequences of this trend. Lijphart (1997) has famously argued that low turnout is a problem for democracies because abstention does not occur randomly. A number of empirical studies have confirmed Lijphart's suspicions. For example, it has been shown that voters with lower income levels, lower educational attainment, or voters belonging to the lower social classes are less likely to turn out to vote. Consequently, low turnout implies biased representation (Smets and van Ham, 2013; Quintelier et al., 2011; Schlozman et al., 1999; Verba et al., 1978; Irwin, 1974). Others, however, have argued that low turnout could be a 'blessing in disguise' if those not turning out to vote would have based their vote choice on factors that do not fit into theories of electoral accountability. It is then claimed that it would be better for democracy if those voters stayed at home on Election Day (Lutz and Marsh, 2007; Rosema, 2007).

Lijphart proposes compulsory voting as a solution to this problem of biased representation. Compulsory voting has a number of systemic effects. Most obviously, compulsory voting increases turnout (Jaitman, 2013; Blais, 2006; Geys, 2006; Hirczy, 1994). Compulsory voting has been shown to increase the effective number of parties (Jensen and Spoon, 2011)—but not alter support won by different types of parties (Birch, 2009)—and reduce the gap between the electorate's interests and the interests present in the legislature (Jaitman, 2013; Louth and Hill, 2005; Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1998; Lijphart, 1997). Other research, however, finds compulsory voting induces uninterested and less knowledgeable voters to cast a ballot (Selb and Lachat, 2009). Scholars have used surveys to examine the effect of abstention on vote shares if voting became voluntary in countries that mandate voting. In the Australian context, studies from the 1996 election find a benefit for the Labor party (Mackerras and McAllister, 1999; Jackman, 1999). Similar analyses of voting in Belgium, however, suggests a minor electoral impact (Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1998; Reuchamps et al., 2015).

DeNardo (1980) presents the predominant formal theoretical model for explaining the partisan effects of high turnout. When turnout is high we should expect the out-party to do better than when turnout levels are low. High turnout elections mobilize a greater proportion of the electorate, bringing along voters with a more tenuous level of political knowledge and partisan affiliation, and thus more likely to defect from their partisan loyalties. In short, "campaigners for the minority party should celebrate when the fickle periphery turns out in force" (DeNardo, 1980, 418). Whether turnout on its own is sufficient to change an electoral result remains an open question. Kohler and Rose (2010) describe a number of boundary conditions in addition to turnout, such as the electoral system, the number of competing parties, and the gap between the winning and runner-up parties that could alter an election result.

The observation that voters do not abstain at random but that particular groups of voters are more likely not to turn out to vote has led to a rich literature investigating the partisan effects of turnout. We know that the less well off, in terms of education or socio-economic status, are less likely to turn out to vote. As these exact characteristics are typically associated with voting for left-of-center parties (Anderson and Beramendi, 2012; Pontusson and Rueda, 2010), it is generally assumed that leftist parties suffer from low turnout rates and do better when turnout is high. There is,

however, considerable cause to question this conclusion (Grofman et al., 1999). Nevertheless, as Highton and Wolfinger (2001, 179) observe "[t]he gist of this conclusion ... is accepted by almost everyone except a few empirical political scientists." We briefly review the literature on partisan effects of turnout before commenting on the value of experimental designs to shed light on this question.

There is, first, evidence suggesting the conventional wisdom has a ring of truth. The United States presidential elections in 1980 and 2000 may have led to Democratic victories had turnout been higher (Brunell and DiNardo, 2004). Martinez and Gill (2005) find a Democratic turnout bias in the 1960 and 1964 presidential elections that is not present in later 1976, 1984, and—interestingly—the 2000 elections. American senatorial and gubernatorial elections mirror this trend. A turnout bias in favor of the Democrats vanished after 1965 (Nagel and McNulty, 1996). In a context of European elections, simulating complete turnout in Germany suggests the Social Democrats may have won the 1994 and 2005 elections (Kohler, 2011). Traditional (i.e. materialist) leftist parties benefited from high turnout in national elections between 1950 and 1990 (Pacek and Radcliff, 1995) and in elections to the European Parliament (Pacek and Radcliff, 2003). High turnout in 1990s post-Soviet elections advantaged leftist parties at the expense of the conservative and nationalist parties (Bohrer et al., 2000). Recent scholarship identified compulsory voting in the Swiss canton Vaud led to greater support for leftist policies between 1925 and 1948 (Bechtel, Hangartner and Schmid, 2016).

Others studies, by contrast, do not find evidence for the claim that the left benefits from high turnout. A separate study based in Switzerland finds simulated full turnout benefits right-of-center parties in direct democratic elections (Lutz, 2007). Another possibility is that minor parties benefit from changes in turnout. Estimating complete turnout in a comparative context reveals the main beneficiaries of increased turnout are small parties and non-incumbents (Bernhagen and Marsh, 2007). Nagel (1988, 26) finds a decrease in turnout of ten percentage points is associated with a drop of 7.77 points in the vote share of the New Zealand Labour party, and a rise of 9.4 points in the vote share of the minor parties. McAllister and Mughan (1986) find the British Liberals—the predecessor to the contemporary Liberal Democrats—are the beneficiaries of higher turnout in British elections between 1964 and 1983. Martins and Veiga (2014) find higher turnout disadvantages right-of-center parties in Portuguese legislative elections, but does not benefit the left-of-center parties.

Null findings are also common in the literature. The United States is a case where the politics of voting are particularly controversial, but the evidence suggests turnout is not biased toward one party or the other (Kaufmann et al., 2008). There is little evidence of a partisan turnout bias in American Presidential elections between 1828 and 1976 (Fenton, 1979). Democratic Senatorial candidates may benefit from increased turnout, but the magnitude of this benefit is small and unlikely to alter an election result (Citrin et al., 2003). The United States is, furthermore, not exceptional in comparative context. Rubenson et al., (2007) compare the policy preferences of voters and non-voters in the 2000 Canadian Federal election and conclude voters' preferences are largely representative of the electorate as a whole; universal turnout would be unlikely to alter the election result. Using multiple imputation to estimate the effects of full turnout in the 2002 Irish election reveals no large shift in vote shares for the parties (Bernhagen and Marsh, 2010). Saglie et al. (2012) examine turnout and the Labour party share of the vote in Norwegian local elections and find the two variables are not causally related. Fisher (2007) argues the association between higher turnout and the vote share of leftist parties are operating