



Increasingly unequal turnout in Eastern European new democracies: Communist and transitional legacies versus new institutions



Ksenia Northmore-Ball

Nuffield College, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 November 2014
 Received in revised form
 28 January 2016
 Accepted 28 January 2016
 Available online 30 January 2016

Keywords:

Voter turnout
 Political inequality
 Education
 Post-communist
 Legacies

ABSTRACT

Unequal turnout, namely that educated citizens are more likely to vote, has been a long-standing pre-occupation of scholars of political participation and has been shown to exist across established democracies in varying degrees. Using pooled cross-sectional individual level data covering the period from 1990 to 2007 across 12 post-communist new democracies, this paper examines the applicability of existing explanations for unequal turnout in the Eastern European context. The paper shows that while voting procedures explain some cross-national variation in unequal turnout, turnout inequality is likewise shaped over time by processes related to the transition from communism, primarily the fading of initial excitement with democratic elections. The mechanism of learning among mature voters rather than generational replacement dominates the latter process.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

In a democracy every citizen should, ideally, have the right to vote and thus have equal political influence. In practice, citizens' influence through elections is hardly equal: wealthier, better educated voters are more likely to vote than the disadvantaged; Lijphart terms this pattern "unequal turnout" (1997). Turnout inequality has naturally received much attention from scholars of democratic political participation (Verba et al., 1995; Brady et al., 1995; Schlozman et al., 2012; Gallego, 2007, 2010; Leighley and Nagler, 2013) and its implications for unequal political influence are repeatedly noted (Mahler, 2008).

Recent efforts to explain the cross-national variation in turnout inequality have focused on the importance of the national institutional context; turnout inequality is almost non-existent in countries with compulsory voting and highest in countries, such as the USA, where onerous registration rules discourage disadvantaged voters (Gallego, 2010). These explanations, however, assume a relatively stable institutional and micro-level social context, and thus are unsuited to capturing the dynamic nature of new democracies. A cross-sectional approach may work for established democracies that are in a stable equilibrium (Gray and Caul, 2000); however the Eastern European new democracies have been in a state of flux since the collapse of communism. We already know that turnout in post-communist countries has declined over time

(Kostadinova, 2003; Kostadinova and Power, 2007) indicating that strong temporal mechanisms are at work. Recent studies that apply theories of socialization and political learning to the post-communist context attest to the dynamic nature of these societies including the fading of communist legacies as well as the effects of new experiences during the transitions (Mishler and Rose, 2007; Neundorff, 2010; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2014). Unequal turnout in post-communist countries must thus be analysed not just cross-sectionally but across time, and particular attention must be given not only to how the context changes but also how the electorate itself is changing both through generational replacement and learning.

This paper firstly complements Aina Gallego's (2010) paper on unequal turnout in established democracies by extending her analysis to Eastern Europe. Thus far no studies have systematically explained turnout inequality in the context of Eastern European new democracies; thus goal of this paper is to assess the current explanations against new ones that specifically apply to these new democracies. The new explanations considered in this paper are (a) the fading of the excitement with democratic elections and (b) the fading effects of compulsory participation in communist elections. Both explanations incorporate the legacies of past regimes and the transitional period itself.

The second part of the analysis compares the older (pre-Cold War and Cold War) and post-Cold War generations weighing the evidence in favour of the two possible dynamic explanations of

E-mail address: ksenia.northmore-ball@nuffield.ox.ac.uk.

turnout inequality: the fading of the initial excitement with democracy driven through learning and the replacement of older generations socialized when voting was compulsory under communism. The findings indicate that learning among the older generations primarily contributed to the increase in turnout inequality, while the replacement of the older generations by the post-Cold War post-transition cohorts made a small contribution.

I begin this paper with an overview of the various potential explanations of turnout inequality; both those found to apply in established democracies as well as explanations that incorporate the transitional nature of the post-communist context. I use pooled survey data from four large mass surveys to maximize cross-sectional and temporal coverage. In this paper I argue that turnout inequality in Eastern Europe can be partially explained by electoral institutions (ballot complexity specifically) as in established democracies, but institutional explanations fail to explain why turnout inequality increased with time. While some replacement of mature post-communist voters by younger cohorts, which neither experienced the habit-forming effects of compulsory voting under communism nor the excitement of the transition, has occurred, the increasing turnout inequality appears to be primarily caused by behavioural change among the older voters. The once excited older voters appear to be accepting democratic elections as a more routine process.

1. Fading euphoria and the end of forced voting

The two main studies, which examine the decline in turnout in post-communist countries, attribute the decline to the natural waning of excitement at the first democratic elections (Kostadinova, 2003; Kostadinova and Power, 2007). The idea that founding elections are somehow unique was most notably put forward by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) who observed, based on several case studies of regime change in Latin America, that the first post-authoritarian elections are a time of euphoria and unusually high levels of interest in politics during which people believe they can shape political outcomes; however, once the new political rules are in place, the excitement wears off. Increasing turnout inequality is part of this 'normalization' process as the disadvantaged voters who are most sensitive to the costs of voting drop out of the electorate.

The founding elections euphoria effect can be understood as being comprised of two components: the high salience of the first election (Fornos et al., 2004) and high hopes for democracy (Hughes and Guerrero, 2009). Arguably the first elections are the most salient elections possible in a democracy as they determine the constitutions and institutions of a new democratic regime. Numerous studies show that voters become mobilized when they perceive the electoral stakes to be high and they believe that individual votes make a difference (Pacek et al., 2009). Secondly, the founding elections, as well as some of the subsequent elections, are characterized by high hopes for what democracy can deliver in terms of policy; with each passing election voters learn that democracy is not a panacea for all problems and they adjust their expectations accordingly, becoming less engaged (Hutcheson, 2004; Kluegel and Mason, 2004; Ingelhart and Cattelberg, 2002). Thus, founding elections in new democracies are characterized by unusually high turnout which then declines over time with each subsequent election (Roussias, 2012).

The 'founding elections' or 'euphoria' effect, as it is often referred to, is not explored theoretically in much depth. Its effect is largely based on the assumption that the first democratic elections after a long period of authoritarianism will cause excitement and voter mobilization. This assumption is further substantiated by the presumed high salience of the first elections and arguments about

the high stakes involved. However, both these justifications would imply a relatively short-lived surge in electoral turnout, and a readjustment could be expected to occur even in the second democratic election.

Alternatively, the 'founding elections' or 'euphoria' effect can be understood in a broader manner to include mobilization of the popular opposition leading up to the regime collapse. Descriptions of the protest cycles leading up to the collapse of the communist regimes show a build-up of protest participation (of varying speeds) culminating in protest events that included up to three quarters of the population (i.e. the November strike in Czechoslovakia) (Glenn, 2003; Rucht, 2003; Ekiert and Kubik, 1998; Ulfelder, 2004). The duration of the protest cycles implies a general level of political mobilization that began earlier than the actual first democratic elections and which could imply a certain momentum that could take time to dissipate. The prolonged nature of opposition mobilization could allow for both updating/re-learning effects among mature citizens as well as socialization effects on the transition cohorts.

The core theoretical principle underlying the 'founding elections' explanation is the idea that voting behaviour progresses towards more 'normal' patterns as democracy becomes routinized. As shown already by several studies, aggregate turnout has declined in post-communist new democracies in keeping with the 'founding elections' explanation (Kostadinova, 2003; Kostadinova and Power, 2007; Roussias, 2012). While it may still be early to see, aggregate turnout should plateau at levels appropriate to the institutions in given countries. At the micro-level, we expect the 'normalization' of turnout to be characterized by a turnout decline concentrated among people who are most sensitive to the costs of voting, in particular people of low socioeconomic status; as the 'founding elections' effect dissipates, the perceived benefits of voting decline relative to the costs, resulting in an increasing turnout gap between high and low status voters.

The elements of socioeconomic status (income, education, and social class) serve as proxies for political engagement and sensitivity to the cost of voting. Verba et al. (1995: 358) find that socioeconomic status, especially education, primarily contributes indirectly to voting; socioeconomic status shapes the 'civic orientations' or 'psychological engagement in politics' such as interest, political efficacy, and civic skills (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995). Educated voters are more likely to vote because they possess more cognitive resources, making the costs of navigating voting procedures and making electoral choices easier to bear. Also educated individuals are more likely to vote because of the 'sorting' effects of the education system; they are more likely to be socialized among equally educated individuals who are interested in politics and to remain embedded in politically active social networks (Abrams et al., 2011; Rolfe, 2012). Verba et al. (1995: 358) find that accounting for 'psychological engagement' in politics in a regression model with the determinants of voting almost eliminates the effects measured for socioeconomic status. Political engagement as well as the social environment of politically engaged people allow for easier acquisition of political information and help reduce sensitivity to costs of voting.

During the extraordinary times of the 'founding elections' when populations are unusually mobilized, 'normal' variation in voting participation along the lines of socioeconomic status should be suppressed reflecting the higher perceived benefits and lower costs of voting. During the exciting times of the first democratic elections, people are more likely to discuss politics and political parties make a greater effort to mobilize voters so political information is 'cheaper.' Individuals who normally would not be interested in politics, such as the poor and the uneducated, will be mobilized to a similar degree as educated voters who normally maintain an

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1051684>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1051684>

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