



Explaining voter turnout: A meta-analysis of national and subnational elections



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ABSTRACT

Research about voter turnout has expanded rapidly in recent years. This article takes stock of this development by extending the meta-analysis of Geys (2006) in two main ways. First, we add 102 studies published between 2002 and 2015 to the initial sample of 83 studies. Overall, we document only minor changes to the original inferences. Second, since different processes might conceivably play at different levels of government, we exploit the larger sample to separately analyse the determinants of voter turnout in national versus subnational elections. We find that campaign expenditures, election closeness and registration requirements have more explanatory power in national elections, whereas population size and composition, concurrent elections, and the electoral system play a more important role for explaining turnout in subnational elections.

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1. Introduction

Elections are central to democratic polities (Ashworth, 2012; Geys and Mause, 2016), and scholars have long sought to identify and explain variation in electoral participation across time and space. Indeed, few topics in political science have generated a comparable volume of literature, and turnout scholarship witnessed a veritable explosion over the past 15 years. A search for ‘voter turnout’ in Thomson Reuters’ Web of Science database, for instance, shows that the *absolute* number of turnout articles has followed a sharply upward trend since 2000 (see Fig. 1). The number of articles on voter turnout published in 2014 (i.e. 197) is nearly four times the number of articles published in 2000 (i.e. 50). This is not just because more studies are being published in general. An identical query in JSTOR reveals a similar upward trend in the *relative* proportion of articles dealing with voter turnout within the overall number of articles indexed in its corpus in a given year (i.e. from 0.002 in 2000 to 0.006 in 2012; see Fig. 1).

Clearly, effective accumulation of knowledge stems not only from conducting original studies, but also from taking stock of

what we have learnt so far. In addition to literature reviews following a conventional state-of-the-art model (Blais, 2006), two meta-analytic assessments of the determinants of voter turnout were published in recent years. Geys (2006) reviews 83 aggregate-level studies published between 1968 and 2004, while Smets and van Ham (2013) analyse the findings of 90 individual-level studies published between 2000 and 2010. In light of the rapid expansion of the voter turnout literature documented in Fig. 1, this article aims to further develop our knowledge on why people vote by extending the aggregate-level meta-analysis conducted by Geys (2006) in two ways. First, we supplement the 83 studies featured in the original analysis with 102 additional studies published since 2002. This expanded and more diverse pool of literature allows us to increase the validity and generalizability of the meta-analysis, and thereby our confidence in the inferences drawn.

Second, we exploit the larger sample of studies to assess whether, and to what extent, the same set of determinants can explain voter turnout in elections at different levels of government. To the best of our knowledge, no such direct comparison currently exists. In fact, theoretical arguments and explanatory variables in most studies appear to be brought forward without specific attention to the level of government under analysis. Studies of political participation thus generally appear to follow

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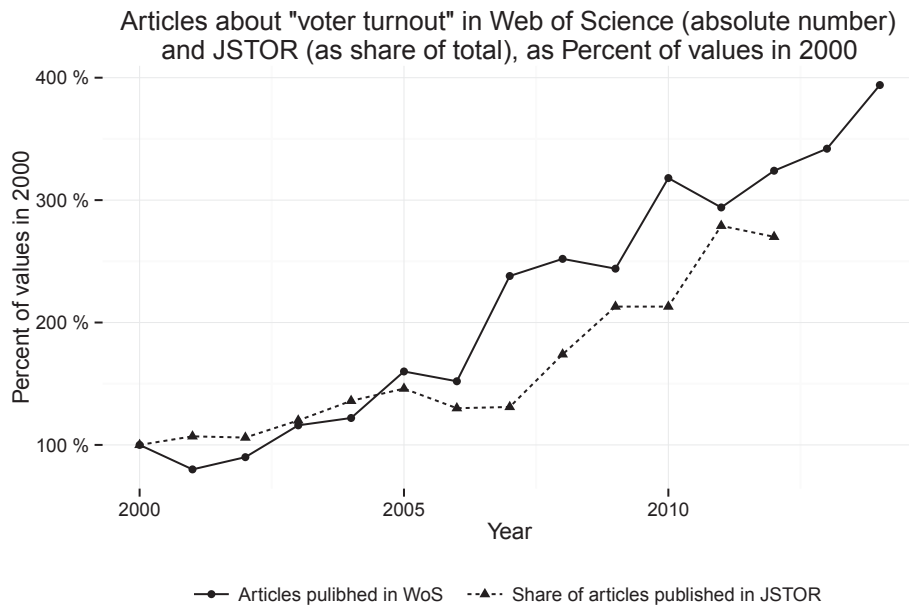


Fig. 1. Development of voter turnout literature: 2000–2014. Note: Published articles about voter turnout. The solid line represents the yearly evolution of the number articles returned in a search for ‘voter turnout’ in Thomson Reuters Web of Science. The dashed line represents the number of articles on ‘voter turnout’ available in JSTOR as a share of the total number of articles published in a given year. Both time-series are expressed as a percentage of the values observed for the year 2000. Data for JSTOR available only until 2012. Sources: Thomson Reuters Web of Science and JSTOR Data for Research.

an a-territorial approach in which local or regional politics is effectively viewed as a mere generalization of what goes on at the national level (Baybeck, 2014). As a result, the determinants of political engagement – both at the individual and aggregate level – are implicitly assumed not to differ across territorial levels.

Nevertheless, this view can be contested from a theoretical as well as empirical perspective. For instance, Sellers et al. (2013, p. 8) draw on the tradition of political geography to argue that voters are embedded in places defined by specific ‘collective dynamics of communities and social mobilisation’, which can foster turnout in some types of elections but not others. One recent illustration of this effect is provided in Andersen et al. (2014, p. 157, italics added), who offer strong evidence that ‘higher stakes at the local level increase participation at the local *relative to* the regional election’. Furthermore, from an empirical point of view, relevant discrepancies clearly exist in the levels of engagement between national and local politics. This is reflected in, for instance, significant variation in voter turnout for elections at different levels of government within the same jurisdiction (Andersen et al., 2014; Horiuchi, 2005; Morlan, 1984; Sørensen, 2015). As such, we cannot simply assume a general equivalence of turnout determinants irrespective of the type of election. By separately analysing studies on voter turnout in national versus subnational elections, we assess the different processes that might conceivably play at distinct levels of government.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Methodological approach

Meta-analyses – which can be defined as ‘quantitative methods for combining information across different studies’ (Tweedie, 2001,

p. 9717) – are useful tools to aggregate existing knowledge and highlight what we know and do not know about certain phenomena. Yet, while they are common in, for instance, psychology and medicine, they have remained quite rare in political science (Morton and Williams, 2010, p. 272).¹ In this article, we follow the procedures employed by Geys (2006), which effectively constitute a blend of ‘vote-counting’ and ‘combined tests’ procedures. Specifically, the aggregation of findings in our meta-analysis is conducted as follows.

First, the direction of the expected effect is defined *a priori* for each independent variable. This constitutes the yardstick for evaluating the coefficient estimates reported in the studies in the meta-analysis. A *study* (article, working paper, chapter, or book) will often include more than one coefficient estimate for the same variable, due to the use of distinct model specifications or samples. Each reported coefficient estimate for a given variable of interest is referred to as a *test*, and can be categorised as ‘success’ (if there is a statistically significant association with the expected sign), a ‘failure’ (if the observed relation is not statistically significant at conventional levels) or an ‘anomaly’ (if the observed association is statistically significant, but its sign is contrary to expectations). Second, the number of successful, failed and anomalous tests is recorded for each study. Third, if more than half of the reported tests in a given study are successful, then the modal outcome for that study is coded as a ‘success’. Otherwise, the study’s modal outcome is ‘failure’.

Using this simple coding scheme, a number of metrics can be derived. The first of these provides a proxy measure of effect size r , and is calculated using the outcomes of individual tests within each study as:

$$r = \frac{\text{successes} - \text{anomalies}}{\text{number of tests}}$$

The values of r for each individual study lie between -1 and 1 , and can be averaged across studies to yield the average approximate effect size r_{av} for each variable under analysis. We can also

¹ In addition to the mentioned meta-analyses on turnout, other published meta-analyses in political science include Doucouliagos and Ulubaşoğlu (2008), Boulianne (2009) and Ahmadov (2014).

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