



# What's at stake? A veto-player theory of voter turnout<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Turnout is theorized to reflect elections' policy stakes. All else equal, a highly constrained policymaking context is expected to lower the potential policy stakes of a given election. This study tests if such contexts, which are characterized by multiple veto players, reduce electoral participation. According to time-series cross-sectional autoregressive dynamic lag models of turnout in 311 elections in 21 advanced industrialized democracies, additional veto players decrease turnout in both the short and long run. Moreover, the results suggest veto players conceptually fine-tune and empirically contribute to existing models of cross-national turnout. Hence this study has crucial implications for the students of electoral participation and scholars interested in the democratic outcomes of institutional design.

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The policy stakes of elections are considered crucial to explaining why citizens vote: the more public policy is expected to be at stake, the more consequential elections become, the more likely people are to turnout (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Brockington, 2004; Franklin, 1996, 1999, 2004; Jackman, 1987; Powell, 1986; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Most studies gauge elections' policy stakes with institutional (e.g. electoral system, constitutional structure) and political factors (e.g. multipartyism, government composition). Yet these institutional and political factors interact to create a unique *policymaking context*, understood as the distribution of policymaking power across and within state institutions and the government. If voter turnout levels are theoretically a function of the policy stakes of elections, then they should empirically reflect changes in the policymaking context.

The central goal of this study is to situate turnout within a broader policymaking environment. To that end, it employs the veto-player framework to summarize the complex policymaking context of elections. As the individual and collective actors "whose agreement is necessary for a change of the status quo" (Tsebelis, 2002, 19), veto players condition the policymaking process: more veto players, less policy change. Hence the key hypothesis is that a more constrained policymaking context, characterized by multiple veto players, reduces the policy stakes of elections and, thus, voter turnout.

Thanks to changes in veto players, policymaking constraints can fluctuate widely from one election to the next. Common ways veto players change include, but are not limited to, shifts to and from divided and unified government; the entrance or exit of an ideologically extreme party to the legislature; altering the vote threshold for parties to gain legislative seats; cabinet shuffles; the formation or dissolution of a grand coalition; shedding an extraneous minor party to achieve a minimum-winning coalition; and a move from majority to minority governments. Less common but more enduring alterations to policy veto players include a change from bicameral to unicameral legislature (and *vice versa*); adding or subtracting power from one legislative chamber to the other; and adopting a

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new electoral system. All of these examples alter the fluidity of the policymaking context and thus shape the relevance of any election for changing the *status quo*. In short, they change the potential policy stakes of a given election, and may thus give scholars theoretical traction on the question of why turnout varies over time and across countries. Conceptually, veto players help scholars fine-tune previous models of turnout which employ one or more of the aforementioned aspects of the policymaking context.

This study tests whether the dynamics of policy veto players affect voter turnout with a time-series cross-sectional analysis of 311 elections from 21 established democracies 1950–2007. The analysis shows that as veto players proliferate and constrict the policymaking context turnout can be expected to decline. Yet the results of the autoregressive dynamic lag models suggest that rather than an immediate, one-off drop in turnout, additional veto players decrease turnout over multiple election cycles. Indeed, several classic predictors of turnout—compulsory voting, multipartyism, disproportionality, economic development, democracy levels—are shown to have no real short-run impacts on turnout but rather significant long-run cumulative effects while others—executive responsiveness, executive elections, union density—influence turnout both immediately *and* over time. In sum, our findings support our theoretical claim that, by constraining the policymaking environment, veto players reduce the relevance of elections for policymaking and, in turn, turnout. Moreover, they support Franklin's (2004) path-breaking thesis that the full implications of contextual changes for turnout are often best appreciated over multiple elections.

Placing elections within an ever-changing policymaking context could potentially shore up some theoretical inconsistencies in the cross-national turnout literature (cf. Blais, 2006; Geys, 2006). For example, if sticky institutional and political factors poorly predict immediate fluctuations in turnout (Franklin, 2004; Gray and Caul, 2000), then evidence that turnout also reflects shifts in more dynamic veto players could help resolve the matter. Another example is the ambiguity of multipartyism for turnout. Downs's (1957) paradox is that multiparty systems at once give voters more choice among policy positions but, because coalitions are often needed to govern, they grant less control over government formation. By abstracting to the distribution of power across political actors in government and in the institutions tasked with policymaking (the legislature and the executive), veto players can better isolate the effects of multipartyism on turnout. Practically speaking, if the policymaking context matters for voting, it would point reformers seeking to boost turnout in the direction of more holistic rather than piecemeal approaches.

The theory section below explains how the policy context, in general, and veto players, in particular, inform and are compatible with a range of voting models. A subsequent measurement section compares the conceptual advantages veto players have over previous measures of the policymaking context. Next the section on research design describes the variables and methodology employed in the analysis. Then an empirical section discusses the

results of the time-series cross-sectional autoregressive dynamic lag analysis that permits comparisons of the short-term and long-run effects of veto players to other variables in the models. The concluding section summarizes the theoretical contributions and normative implications of this research.

## 1. Theory

Veto players affect voter turnout by influencing the policy outcomes at stake in an election. Numerous veto players promote policy stability (Tsebelis, 2002; Henisz, 2002, 2004) but necessarily diminish any expectations about what government can hope to change if elected. Where election winners have less leeway to deliver on their platforms and implement their agendas, the likely policy stakes of a given election and, perhaps, elections in general, are lower. Contexts featuring multiple veto players are characterized by negotiations, satisficing, and, at worst, stalemate. Under such conditions, election winners are less consequential for policy outcomes.

Using veto players to capture the potential policy stakes of elections is the core theoretical contribution of this study. The importance of elections' policy stakes is a central theme connecting Downs's (1957) seminal rational choice voting theories to Riker and Ordeshook's (1968) calculus of voting and to Ferejohn and Fiorina's (1974) minimax regret decision-theoretic model. It also runs through recent efforts to overcome some of the empirical shortcomings of models developed in this vein.

Franklin's (2004) recent reformulation of Riker and Ordeshook's model is one such effort. It assumes would-be voters learn about the benefits and policy effects of the election for themselves and like-minded individuals via social networks, formal groups, and parties; abstaining incurs the costs of sanctioning by other members of their social group for failing to contribute to effort to change or affect the election. Franklin's main theoretical innovation is the proposition that "the benefits of voting center on the likelihood that a given vote will encourage and contribute to full turnout by all the members of a potentially winning coalition of voters (49)... If each vote has a motivating impact on other members of a group, then each vote effectively counts more than once" (51). So whereas individuals are isolated in Riker and Ordeshook's model and thus calculate the benefits and probability of casting a decisive vote in relation to the whole electorate, in Franklin's model benefits and decisiveness are calculated in relation to one's social reference group. Since, especially in close races, voters may expect their votes to be potentially decisive and very beneficial, and the social costs of abstaining relatively large, they will turnout. The motivation to vote in a socially connected world is not limited to social costs of abstention but also the social benefits of encouraging others to vote.

Essentially, the connectedness of a social group creates an incentive to vote because voting will, in turn, encourage others in the group to vote, creating a multiplier effect. Yet this multiplier effect is not a foregone conclusion—the overall benefit is conditional on the election's *policy stakes* (Franklin, 2004, 44, 49). If the potential policy salience of

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