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Electoral consequences of declining participation: A natural experiment in Austria



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ABSTRACT

Participation rates have declined sharply across developed democracies. But the precise impact of this decline on party systems has proven difficult to study due to endogeneity concerns. This paper seeks to address this issue by leveraging a natural experiment in Austrian parliamentary elections. By examining instances in which compulsory voting was gradually repealed in a federal setting, I isolate the causal relationship between turnout decline and subsequent shifts in party vote share. The findings suggest that turnout decline is not associated with a significant redistribution of votes between parties. The clearest visible effect is a consolidation of the party system, with a mild shift in votes from minor to mainstream parties. Evaluating the findings, the paper argues that characteristics of proportional representation systems insulate parties against the consequences of declining electoral participation.

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1. Introduction

Over the last thirty years, there has been a notable decline in electoral participation across developed European democracies. The recent spate of economic turmoil has not slowed this trend: in the latest round of parliamentary elections, France, Germany, and Italy all recorded historic lows. In response, many policymakers and academics have raised concerns of an emerging ‘democratic deficit’ in European politics. And while this critique is primarily normative, there may be reason to be concerned on practical grounds as well. Because decline in voter participation is often asymmetric with respect to demographic categories, declines in electoral turnout may be accompanied with shifts in the balance of political power.

At face value, the recent success of conservative parties in Europe lends some credence to this claim. However, the precise relationship between declining participation and

changes in party vote share remains unclear. Regressing participation rates on vote share – either cross-nationally or longitudinally – is unlikely to generate strong inferences because factors that affect participation are likely to influence party choice as well.¹ Recognizing this issue, the majority of studies that investigate the relationship between participation and party choice have focused on the identity of the ‘non-voter.’ By leveraging data on low turnout districts or analyzing survey responses, it is possible to investigate how turnout varies according to demographic, partisan and socioeconomic characteristics. But although these studies have reached some measure of consensus about which types of voters are likely to participate in elections, the electoral implications are less clear. For instance, depending on the particular mechanism through which preferences are translated into votes, high levels of participation could be viewed as likely to benefit

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E-mail address: ferwerda@mit.edu.¹ These approaches can still reveal useful correlations and trends related to turnout and party support; the issue at stake is whether the relationship is causal.

parties of the Left (Pacek and Radcliff, 1995; Lijphart, 1997; Herron, 1998; Mackerras and McAllister, 1999; Jackman, 1999; Sides et al., 2008), populist or centrist parties (Whiteley, 1977; Prior, 2007; Hidalgo, 2010),² or minor/protest parties (Belanger, 2004; Bernhagen and Marsh, 2007). Regardless, the outcomes in question remain hypothetical given that we cannot actually observe how non-voters would have voted in a realized setting.

This paper seeks to add new empirical evidence to this debate. I use the institution of compulsory voting law as a means to introduce variation in turnout while minimizing endogeneity concerns. Specifically, I draw upon municipal-level data and leverage subnational variation in compulsory voting within a single case: Austria in the early 1990s. With the exception of one Swiss canton (Vaud), Austria is the only modern democracy to have permitted subnational variation in compulsory voting law within national elections.³ The variation at the subnational level creates a natural experiment in which the effect of turnout decline on party vote share can be causally identified with a difference-in-differences design. While this approach implies a reduction in external validity, it allows for the robust analysis of electoral outcomes in a non-hypothetical setting.

The results suggest that the effect of decreased turnout on party vote share is minimal. Municipalities that experienced large declines in turnout caused by the repeal of compulsory voting were likely to vote similarly to control municipalities that did not experience such declines. This result is consistent across a variety of specifications and holds even for municipalities that experienced declines in excess of 15%. Indeed, the only clear effect of declining participation is a mild consolidation of the party system, with a redistribution of votes from minor parties to the mainstream Social Democratic Party. Although care should be taken when extending the findings to other settings,⁴ at minimum the results provide strong empirical support for the claim that researchers should be wary of assuming that declining turnout in developed democracies will necessarily translate into consequential shifts in party vote share (Lutz and Marsh, 2007; Van der Eijk and Van Egmond, 2007).

2. Compulsory voting as a natural experiment

By levying financial or administrative penalties, the institution of compulsory voting ‘encourages’ many individuals who would otherwise not vote to register their preferences at the polls. Since this institution is often orthogonal to factors that affect party choice, examining contexts in which compulsory voting has been

implemented provides a useful tool to study the effects of participation while minimizing endogeneity concerns.⁵

In this paper I focus on the *repeal* of compulsory voting within a developed democracy. Austria is one of the few European states to maintain compulsory voting well into the post-war period, with the practice finally being phased out in a series of legal steps between 1982 and 2004. However, unlike other instances in which compulsory voting law has been applied in developed countries, jurisdiction over voting law has frequently shifted between the state ($n = 9$) and the national level. As a result, there is significant subnational variation in the incidence of compulsory voting in national elections (see Fig. 1).

To provide a brief background, Austria possesses three main election types, all of which have utilized compulsory voting enforced by financial sanctions at different points in time (Gratschew, 2004). In the presidential and provincial elections, voting was compulsory in all states until 1982, when the decision was devolved to the state level. Although four states continued to practice compulsory voting after this decision, the law was eventually abolished in all states by 2004.

In contrast to the presidential and provincial elections, the constitution of the Second Austrian Republic granted states from the outset the authority to determine whether to implement compulsory voting in national parliamentary elections (Article 26/1). Three out of nine states implemented compulsory voting beginning in 1949: Styria, Tyrol, and Vorarlberg. A fourth, Carinthia, joined the ranks in 1986 despite previously high turnout levels in the province.⁶ However, in 1992 the constitutional court ruled that Article 26/1 was invalid and states no longer had the authority to enforce compulsory voting in national parliamentary elections (Bundes-Verfassungsgesetz-Novelle, BGBl. Nr. 4s70). As a result, all four states abruptly ended compulsory voting beginning in the 1994 election.

Although all three elections types provide an opportunity to leverage subnational variation in compulsory voting law, this paper focuses exclusively on the parliamentary elections (Nationalratswahl). Within the Austrian system, parliamentary elections are far more consequential than presidential elections, given that the president serves a largely symbolic role. Moreover, unlike the provincial elections, parliamentary elections are national in scope and are held on the same date across the country.

Most importantly, the fact that the 1992 law change occurred as a result of judicial review and not as the result of legislative politics sharply reduces the danger of selection

² The literature that highlights decreased levels of political sophistication under high turnout or compulsory voting would lead one to suspect gains for populist parties (Ackaert and De Winter, 1996; Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1998; Rosema, 2007; Selb and Lachat, 2009), although this is not always claimed directly.

³ For an example of subnational compulsory voting in an early democracy, see Fowler 2013.

⁴ In particular, the results should not be expected to hold in developing democracies.

⁵ Given that compulsory voting raises turnout through an artificial process, some scholars have argued that compulsory voting systems differ in important ways from non-compulsory systems with high levels of political participation (Selb and Lachat, 2009; Jensen and Spoon, 2011). This is likely true, and researchers should be cautious about over-extrapolating results from compulsory systems. However, given the highly endogenous relationship between political participation and party support, compulsory voting remains one of the best available tools to study large shifts in turnout in consequential elections.

⁶ Carinthia's decision to implement compulsory turnout under conditions of high turnout underscores the fact compulsory voting was not introduced within these states as a remedy to correct low turnout; rather, it was largely an attempt to increase democratic legitimacy.

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