

A mixed blessing for the left? Early voting, turnout and election outcomes in Norway[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Is there a relationship between turnout and election outcomes? Although this is a classic topic in political science, most studies on multiparty systems have important theoretical and empirical shortcomings. First, we argue that the proper implication of the theoretical argument that underpins research on the turnout-vote nexus is that high levels of turnout should typically benefit both traditional social democratic parties *and* parties of the radical right relative to other types of parties, including not only those of the traditional right, but also 'left-libertarian' parties. Second, few have studied the relationship between turnout and election outcomes with a research design that is appropriate for causal inference. In our empirical study, our identification strategy is to exploit a Norwegian reform of early voting rules as an exogenous source of variation in turnout. Our theoretical expectations are largely borne out in our empirical results.

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1. Introduction

Low levels of citizen participation in politics have long been seen as a serious democratic problem. For many, the most important reason to be concerned about the level of turnout goes back to *Tingsten's* (1937, 230) 'law of dispersion', which states that when turnout is high "the difference in participation between different categories of electors (...) is comparatively low". In a modern version of this argument, researchers claim that high levels of turnout are correlated with less systematic bias against the participation of downscale socio-economic groups, and therefore also more equal democratic representation (*Lijphart, 1997*).

In this paper, we contribute to the study of one of the most important variations of this argument, namely that left-of-center parties, which are typically claimed to be disproportionately supported by downscale socio-economic groups, will benefit systematically from higher levels of turnout. In the United States, this has led many to expect a positive relationship between turnout and the share of the vote going to the Democratic Party. Indeed, several studies of the United States, as well as of the social democratic vote in other countries with two major parties, have found such a correlation (e.g. *Radcliff, 1994; McAllister, 1986; Nagel, 1988*). The same basic argument has also been extended to multi-party democracies, the hypothesis being that high levels of turnout should increase the total vote share of the left-of-center parties that exist in the countries in question. In this case, too, several studies have found evidence that are consistent with the hypothesis (*Pacek and Radcliff, 1995; Bartolini, 2000; Bohrer et al., 2000; Aguilar and Pacek, 2000*).¹

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¹ For a study of elections to the European Parliament, which finds a similar correlation, see *Pacek and Radcliff (2003)*.

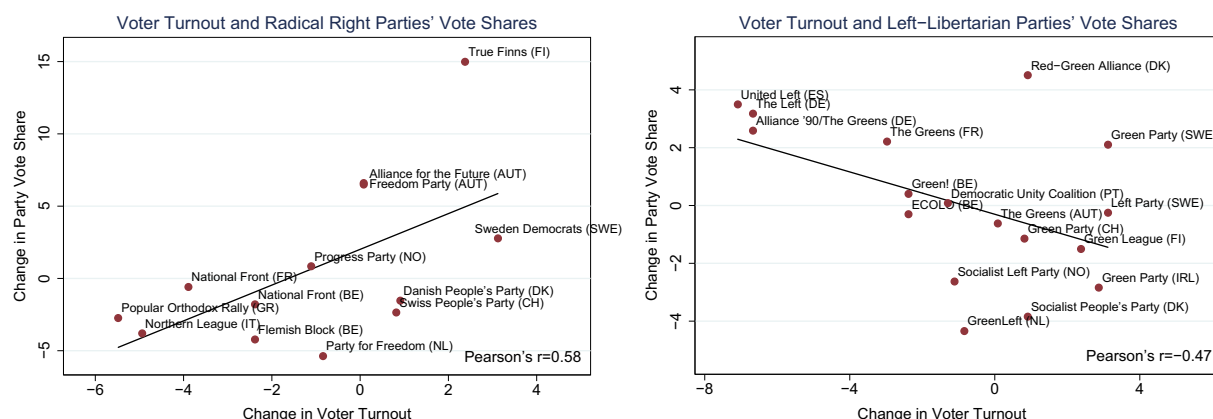


Fig. 1. Change in turnout and party vote shares in the most recent parliamentary election in Western Europe. Note: Country abbreviations in parentheses. The figures refer to changes from the penultimate to the most recent parliamentary elections in Western European countries as of March 2013. Lines are linear predictions from bivariate OLS-regressions. Only parties with 2% of the votes or more in the penultimate election are included.

However, the empirical findings cited above are far from uncontested, and several studies have produced evidence that stand in contradiction to them (e.g. Erikson, 1995; Fisher, 2007). In order to partially account for the conflicting results in the literature, we raise two objections to previous research. The first is theoretical in nature, and mainly concerns the application of the modern version of the 'law of dispersion' to (mainly Western European) multi-party democracies. During the last three or four decades, we have witnessed the emergence and spread of both 'left-libertarian' parties, which include new left parties as well as green parties, and 'radical right' parties (Kitschelt, 1988; Mair, 2001). Electoral support for 'left-libertarian' parties, even when they are reformed communist parties, does not come primarily from the downscale socio-economic groups that have been the main constituency of traditional social-democratic parties (Poguntke, 1987; Franklin and Rüdiger, 1995; Dolezal, 2010). By contrast, support for 'radical right' parties often does (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Lubbers et al., 2002; Norris, 2005). Given that high levels of turnout reduce the bias against the participation of downscale socio-economic groups, they should be negatively associated with 'left-libertarian' vote shares. By the same token, turnout should not only have a positive impact on the vote share of traditional social democratic parties, but also that of 'radical right' parties.² These are the proper implications of the theoretical argument that underpins research on the turnout-vote nexus, and they warn us strongly against equating high turnout with electoral success for the left as a whole.

Indeed, suggestive evidence does corroborate our theoretical objections against previous research. Looking at the most recent parliamentary elections in Western Europe, we can see that increased turnout is correlated with decreased 'left-libertarian' vote shares and increased

'radical right' vote shares. In Fig. 1, we plot changes in the vote shares of 'left-libertarian' parties and 'radical-right' parties against changes in turnout. The data are from the most recent parliamentary elections in these countries. As can be seen in the leftmost panel, there is a relatively strong positive correlation between increases in turnout and 'radical right' party vote shares.³ As can be seen from the rightmost panel, on the other hand, 'left-libertarian' vote shares appear to respond negatively to increases in turnout.⁴ Although the patterns shown in Fig. 1 are suggestive, and indicate that our hypotheses merit further investigation, it is obvious that they should be interpreted with extreme caution.

This brings us to our second objection, which is methodological in nature and applies equally well to both studies of two- and multi-party democracies. In particular, any observed relationship between turnout and election outcomes, such as those shown in Fig. 1, may be driven by reverse causation and omitted variables. Therefore, the positive relationship between turnout and the vote for certain types of parties uncovered in some studies may not be causal. Alternatively, the failure of some studies to detect any relationship between turnout and election outcomes may also be due to an inappropriate research design. Our point is that none of the above-mentioned studies have utilized a research design that is appropriate for causal inference, and that this may be part of the explanation for their contradictory results. The only previous papers that we are aware of that have raised this point address the debate over the existence of a positive relationship between turnout and elections outcomes in the United States (Gomez et al., 2007; Hansford and Gomez, 2010). Using a

² This is obviously irrespective of to what degree social democratic and 'radical right' parties compete for already mobilized voters from the same socio-economic groups, since they will both improve their vote share if they attract non-voters.

³ The slope coefficient when regressing the change in the radical right vote share on the change in turnout is 1.2, and is statistically significant using robust standard errors with $p < 0.05$. The number of parties included in the graph and in the regression analysis is 13.

⁴ The slope coefficient when regressing the change in the left-libertarian parties' vote shares on the changes in turnout is -0.4 , and is statistically significant using robust standard errors with $p < 0.05$. The number of parties in the graph and in the regression analysis is 17.

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