



A comparative analysis of voter turnout in regional elections

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ABSTRACT

Elections to regional assemblies have become increasingly important as the power and responsibilities of regional governments have increased. Yet, few studies have attempted to explain the considerable variation in turnout in regional elections from one region to another. This article conducts a cross-sectional examination of voter participation in regional elections across nine multi-level OECD states between 2003 and 2006. It contends that standard models of voter turnout in national elections are insufficient to explain variation in turnout in regional elections and argues for the use of independent variables tailored to capture variation across regional communities and regional political institutions. Our findings suggest that variations in the strength of political autonomy and the strength of attachment to the region among the electorate have a strong and positive impact on the level of turnout in regional elections.

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1. Introduction

A key political development of the last decades of the twentieth century was the rise of sub-state regional government. Across many advanced industrial states, new elected regional tiers of government were established or existing regional institutions were given greater power and responsibility (Lynch, 1996; Keating, 1998; Loughlin, 2001; Bache and Flinders, 2004). Observing such political developments within the EU, Hooghe and Marks (2001) found that no member state had become more centralised in the twenty years since 1980, and almost half had decentralised political authority to a regional tier of government. Regional institutions now make legislative, policy and spending decisions over a vast range of activities central to their populations. The legitimacy underpinning regional rule comes less from the central governments who have dispersed this authority than from the regional populations electing regional rulers. It is perhaps surprising, then, that there has been relatively little attention paid to political

participation in regional elections, especially from a comparative perspective.

Some researchers have examined individual case studies of regional participation, often using the theory of 'second-order' elections as a framework to consider the multi-level dynamics of electoral participation and competition in regional and national elections (Abedi and Siaroff, 1999; Curtice, 2003; Hough and Jeffery, 2003, 2006; Pallarés and Keating, 2006; Loughlin and Bolgherini, 2006).² Others have tried to explain variation in regional turnout *within* states (Percival et al., 2007). But we know of no studies that provide a systematic comparative examination of variation in political participation in regional elections *across* states.³ Thus, a key question

² Throughout the text we refer to the 'national' and 'state' levels interchangeably. We recognise that in multi-national states in particular this label may be less useful than in nation-states, but have employed it to distinguish clearly this level from the regional or sub-state level.

³ Horiuchi's study of relative voter turnout in national versus sub-national elections – discussed elsewhere in this article – is a partial exception to this. Although his interest lies principally in explaining why turnout in some municipal elections in Japan is higher than turnout in Japanese national elections, his book includes a preliminary comparative model of relative voter turnout between national, regional and municipal elections in 16 OECD countries (Horiuchi, 2005: 37–44).

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remains unanswered: why do some regions record higher rates of voter participation than others?

This article addresses this question, drawing upon a broad literature on voter participation in national and European elections (Jackman and Miller, 1995; Lijphart, 1997; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Gray and Caul, 2000; Franklin, 2002, 2004; Lutz and Marsh, 2007) as well as insights from the literature on the politics of regionalism (Keating, 1998, 2001a,b; Loughlin, 2001; Hooghe and Marks, 2001). It conducts a comparative analysis of turnout levels in regional elections across nine multi-level states. These include long-established federations (Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland) and regionalised states (Italy, Spain), as well as those where the territorial restructuring of the state has been more recent (Belgium, United Kingdom). The sample includes regions in all federal or regionalised OECD states with parliamentary systems.

In each case, the region is defined as the territory between the municipality and the central state with an elected authority that possesses designated legislative and executive powers such as German *länder*, Spanish autonomous communities and Australian states. The primary objective is to explore variation in turnout across regions within and across states. As the region is the unit of analysis, we rely on aggregate data. In examining why some regions recorded higher turnout than others, we investigate the contributions made by region-specific variables such as distinctiveness and relative political authority to existing understandings of participation in regional elections. This leads us to two hypotheses, explained below, followed by an account of the measurement of our variables and method of analysis, and an analysis of the results.

2. Turnout in regional elections: less at stake?

Conventional wisdom in elections literature holds that turnout in regional and other lower level elections is generally lower than turnout in national elections (Franklin, 1999; Lijphart, 1997). The prevailing explanation for such lower rates of participation is that lower level institutions have less political salience than national institutions, and there is less at stake in the outcome of an election, and consequently less incentive to vote. Elections to these institutions have thus been categorised as ‘second order’.

The theory of ‘second-order elections’ was first advanced by Reif and Schmitt to explain voting behaviour in the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, and has subsequently been applied to explain voting in later European parliamentary elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Reif, 1985; Irwin, 1995; Heath et al., 1997; Marsh, 1998; Schmitt, 2004; Flickinger and Studlar, 2007; Clark and Rohrschneider, 2009). The theory highlighted the connection between second-order elections and first-order national elections, with the outcome of the former at least partially determined by concerns, cleavages and performance in the first-order political arena. Although the focus of their discussion was European Parliament elections, Reif and Schmitt included regional elections, municipal elections, by-elections and elections to second

chambers as the sorts of elections that may be categorised as ‘second order’ (Reif and Schmitt, 1980: p. 8).⁴

A key explanation for the subordinate role played by second-order elections is that they have less at stake than national elections. For example, European Parliament elections and by-elections do not result in the election of a government, and therefore they have fewer implications for the direction of public policy. Regional and municipal authorities have less power and responsibility than national governments, and so from the electorate’s perspective, the outcome of elections to these bodies might matter less. The diminished importance attributed to such elections can have consequences for the choices made by the electorate, heightening the extent to which national issues dominate second-order electoral contests, boosting the vote share of smaller parties, and increasing the share of votes recorded as a protest against parties of national government. Of most significance to our analysis, the second-order nature of such contests is thought to diminish the incentive for voting at all. On a rational calculation, in elections with less at stake, the costs of voting are thought to outweigh the benefits for many electors. Less directly, where elections are perceived to be less important, the media and parties may invest less time and money in covering them, with resulting consequences for voter mobilisation (Reif and Schmitt, 1980: pp. 9–10).

It is now commonplace in case studies of regional elections to explore the extent to which they conform to Reif and Schmitt’s second-order categorisation (Abedi and Siaroff, 1999; Curtice, 2003; Hough and Jeffery, 2003, 2006; Pallarés and Keating, 2006; Loughlin and Bolgherini, 2006). However, we have reservations about a general application of second-order theory to explain political participation in regional elections for three main reasons.

First, although fewer electors usually participate in regional elections than in national elections, this is not always the case. Some provincial elections in Canada often produce higher turnout levels than federal elections, particularly in Newfoundland and Quebec. Northern Ireland and the Åland islands also often produce higher rates of participation in regional elections than in national elections. In rural Japan, southern Italy and Switzerland, it is the municipal level which often produces the highest turnout (Studlar, 2001; Horiuchi, 2005). Horiuchi referred to this phenomenon as the ‘turnout twist’, arguing that there were sufficient examples of lower level elections recording higher rates of participation to challenge the conventional wisdom that the reverse is the norm.

Second, unlike by-elections or elections to the European Parliament, regional elections *do* lead to the election of a government. These regional governments can often be responsible for raising and spending considerable resources, and may have a substantial impact on the direction of public policy in the areas under their jurisdiction, which often includes a broad range of policy spheres that matter a great deal to voters, such as health care,

⁴ Indeed, their theory was at least partially inspired by Dinkel’s work on the cyclical and inter-connected dimension of German federal and *länder* elections (Dinkel, 1978; Jeffery and Hough, 2002).

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