

Diversity, density and turnout: The effect of neighbourhood ethno-religious composition on voter turnout in Britain

Edward Fieldhouse*, David Cutts

*Institute for Social Change, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, Oxford Road,
Manchester M13 9PL, UK*

Abstract

Political scientists and sociologists on both sides of the Atlantic have made various, sometimes contradictory claims, about the impact of ethnic, racial and religious diversity, segregation and density on the social cohesion of neighbourhoods and levels of social trust and civic engagement. In this paper we examine differences in turnout between electors of different religious origins, and how this varies by neighbourhood context, using a case study of the British General Election of 2001. Specifically we test whether turnout of religious minorities is higher in neighbourhoods where these populations are most concentrated and/or most diverse and contrast this with the equivalent patterns for the majority population. We find that in general turnout is neither higher nor lower in more diverse neighbourhoods, but despite this, the turnout of minority groups increases as diversity and, more notably, the size of the minority population, increases. The findings support the ‘mobilisation hypothesis’.

© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Turnout; Diversity; Ethnic density; Neighbourhood effects

Introduction

Political geographers have long been interested in the role of neighbourhood context in shaping people’s political behaviour (e.g. Cox, 1969). Recently there has been widespread interest in the impact of the racial, ethnic and religious diversity of neighbourhoods on civic life in general

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 0161 2757439.

E-mail addresses: e.fieldhouse@manchester.ac.uk (E. Fieldhouse), David.cutts@manchester.ac.uk (D. Cutts).

(e.g. Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000, 2002; Costa & Kahn, 2003; Putnam, *in press*) and political participation more specifically (e.g. Hero, 1998; Hill & Leighley, 1999; Kohfeld & Sprague, 2002; Schlichting, Tuckel, & Maisel, 1998). In the U.K. context Fieldhouse and Cutts (2007) found that British Muslim electoral registration was higher where there were greater proportions of Muslims in the electorate, whilst Laurence and Heath (2008) show that ethnic diversity has positive impacts on social cohesion. These findings have huge importance in the context of ongoing debates about the impact of diversity and segregation on social cohesion (see for example, Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007). If a similar pattern proves to be replicated for electoral turnout, then it has important implications for our understanding of how spatial context (specifically ethno-religious diversity and density) shapes the processes by which voters engage in conventional politics. Whilst some well established theories would suggest assimilation and dispersion of minority groups might lead to enhanced levels of participation (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000; Dahl, 1961), our evidence suggests the opposite (cf. Wolfinger, 1965). That is, the findings are consistent with those theories that predict higher levels of group consciousness and mobilisation in areas where minority groups are most concentrated (e.g. Huckfeldt, 1986).

In this paper we use evidence from marked electoral registers for a sample of over half a million electors at the 2001 British General Election to estimate turnout rates at a number of different levels of geography with a high degree of accuracy, and provide comparative estimates for different British Asian¹ communities and the rest of the population. We use these estimates to explore the relationship between the geographical concentration of Asian populations, the diversity of areas, and variations in the turnout. In the U.S. context, in the 1960s, Mathews and Prothro (1966) found the most important county characteristic for Negro participation is the percentage of the Negro population. More recently, Schlichting et al. (1998) found that that turnout in racially homogeneous neighbourhoods was higher than in more diverse settings. Similarly, Hero and Tolbert (2007) found that states with more diverse racial populations have lower levels of turnout. We find evidence in favour of what we refer to as the ‘ethnic mobilization’ hypothesis in a British context. That is we find that turnout increases amongst the minority population as the size of that minority population increases in the locality. We also demonstrate that in the British context, where in comparison with the U.S. populations are not highly segregated, for minority groups greater concentration of or ‘exposure’ to ones own group is more important than ethnic diversity.

Towards a geographical understanding of ‘ethnic mobilisation’

Various explanations have been put forward as to why rates of turnout for minority groups may be lower (or indeed higher) than that of the majority population (Olsen, 1970; Pelissero, Krebs, & Jenkins, 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Southwell & Pirch, 2003; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Some theories such as the racial diversity thesis (Hero, 1998) explicitly predict different outcomes depending on the racial composition of an area. Furthermore, by implication, more general theories of ethnic minority participation would also predict varying levels of engagement according to the ethnic or racial composition of the locality. Whilst this implication is not always explicit in the theory, it may follow logically that the geographical context will shape the contingent circumstances in which a theory’s predictions are manifested.

¹ We adopt the able British Asian or Asian as short hand for resident British populations whose families originate from the Indian sub-continent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) including those born in Britain.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1062307>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1062307>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)