



Election frequency, choice fatigue, and voter turnout



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ABSTRACT

Influential scholars have argued that frequent elections lead to voter fatigue and can therefore be directly responsible for low turnout in countries characterized by frequent contests. However, other theories predict that frequent elections can even increase turnout. The existing empirical evidence is problematic as it simply correlates election frequency with turnout. By contrast, I exploit a natural experiment in the German state of Hesse, where voters from different municipalities faced the same electoral contest but experienced different election frequency, due to the staggered timing of some local elections. I find that when two elections are scheduled within a relatively short period of time, voter turnout at the later election is significantly reduced. This effect is stronger when the election is deemed less important in the eyes of the voters. Election frequency thus might also partly explain the wide turnout gap between first- and second-order elections, as suggested by Lijphart (1997).

1. Introduction

In politically decentralized countries, the frequency of elections and their temporal spacing is naturally an important, heavily discussed topic. In the United States, Founding Fathers and constitutional theorists such as James Madison have already written in the Federalist Papers that they regard “essential to liberty that the government in general should have a common interest with the people” and that an “immediate dependence on, and an intimate sympathy with, the people” is essential for this. He believed that “frequent elections are unquestionably the only policy by which this dependence and sympathy can be effectually secured” (Carey and McClellan, 2001, p.273), thus motivating the enormous number and frequent occurrence of elections in the United States.¹

In line with this, Boyd (1986) mentions several arguments in favor of frequent elections. For example, according to the habituation model of voting, voting in an election leads to familiarity with the voting process and thus increases the likelihood of voting in later elections. Investment theories predict that to the extent to which acquiring political information is costly, a voter effectively invests in sunk costs. Thus, acquiring costly information to participate in an election can decrease such costs for the next elections. For example, the voter has identified sources of political information or learned the physical actions of voting. Third, elections may provide a stimulus for citizens to participate in other contests; e.g., primaries may motivate the voter to attend presidential elections.

On the other hand, several contributions consider a high number of contests directly responsible for low turnout. Especially the persistently low turnout in Switzerland and the United States has been directly explained by the large number of contests in these countries (e.g., Boyd, 1981, 1989; Jackman and Miller, 1995; Lijphart, 1997; Franklin, 2001; Rallings et al., 2003). Several arguments are provided for a negative link between election frequency and turnout. Lijphart (1997) calls voter fatigue the most

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¹ The United States are a leading example for a country with a very high frequency of elections. This is caused first by the multitude of local offices – such as school boards, judges, regulators, persecutors, or sheriffs – that are often directly elected (for many of them, there even exist run-off elections). Second, the high frequency of contests in the US is caused by the importance of primaries and referenda, respectively.

plausible explanation. More formally, in terms of the standard rational choice model of turnout (Downs, 1957), according to Lijphart (1997), frequent elections increase voting costs. Likewise, voters' interest in politics may be satiated or voters may feel that they have fulfilled their civic duty after voting in an election, and then abstain from subsequent contests. A further reason for less voter involvement could be less media coverage of a single election when elections occur frequently. Finally, mobilization efforts of political parties depend both on volunteer labor of party members and campaign contributions, and both might be less easy to realize when elections occur frequently (Boyd, 1986).

Thus, the theoretical literature is inconclusive regarding the effect of election frequency on voter turnout. Such kind of theoretical ambiguity can only be solved empirically. However, how voters react to the frequency and temporal spacing of elections has not yet been studied empirically in a convincing setting. Specifically, existing studies mentioned above simply correlate election frequency with turnout. This is problematic as the relationship between election frequency and turnout might be prone to endogeneity. For example, this is the case when the same (unmeasurable or unobservable) variables that affect election frequency also influence turnout, leading to an omitted variable bias. This study aims to fill this research gap by investigating in a quasi-experimental design whether election frequency can indeed influence turnout. To this end, I employ two different measures of election frequency: First, in the baseline analysis, I measure election frequency with the number of days since the most recent election. Second, I employ the number of elections in the last six (12, 24) months as alternative explanatory variables. Importantly, these measures are highly correlated and give identical results.

In view of the endogeneity discussion, to investigate whether and how election frequency influences turnout, one would ideally like to run a field experiment in which voters are randomly assigned to different last-scheduled elections. As this is infeasible, in my identification strategy, I make use of a natural experiment setting occurring in municipalities of the German state of Hesse that generates quasi-random variation in the temporal distance to the last-scheduled election.² Specifically, while elections to most institutions are scheduled at a uniform date across Hesse's municipalities, this is not the case for some local elections (*Bürgermeister* and *Landrat* elections) that, for historical reasons, take place on staggered dates across municipalities. Thus, in elections with uniform dates, voters in different municipalities will face the same contest on the same date, but experience the most recent election on different dates. This allows me to control for contest-specific effects that could affect voter behavior, such as expected closeness, saliency, or the stakes involved. Furthermore, since I use a large panel dataset of all 426 municipalities over the 1994–2014 period, I am able to control for municipality-specific, time-invariant factors that might affect turnout. A concern that could nonetheless remain is that there may be idiosyncratic, time-variant variables that correlate with both the timing of the staggered elections and with turnout. However, I provide numerous arguments and additional results that support the exogeneity of my explanatory variables. Most importantly, I check the robustness of the results by using only a time period in which municipalities were not able to schedule elections—in which this, rather, was the task of the supervisory authority (*Kommunalaufsicht*).

With regard to the theoretical discussion, other mechanisms than voter fatigue may explain a link between turnout and election frequency, such as media attention or party campaigning. Importantly, my empirical approach allows ruling out many of these other factors. Media attention for European, federal, and state elections is likely the same for all municipalities. Equally, in a proportional election system, party campaigning is less likely to differ across municipalities for these elections. As a final example, party entry into these electoral races is determined at higher than the municipality level. Thus, focusing on elections for higher offices, which are held on uniform dates across municipalities, allows filtering out the effects of these factors on turnout. Therefore, voter fatigue is the most plausible mechanism underlying the results.

I find that both the number of days between elections as well as the number of elections over a specific period have a highly significant effect on turnout. Specifically, the baseline analysis suggests that the closer in time an election is to the most recent one, the lower its turnout will be. More detailed analyses, however, suggest that this effect is non-linear, i.e., the effect mostly matters for those elections within a relatively short time span (approximately 3 months) and that it differs considerably across election types. Most strikingly, for federal elections, the effect is virtually zero. Therefore, my paper provides some tentative evidence for the claim (e.g., Lijphart, 1997, p.8) that voter fatigue might explain the turnout gap between first- and second-order elections.

Besides to a recent literature on determinants of voter turnout (e.g. Jaitman, 2013; Hodler et al., 2015; Garmann, 2016), this study relates to an emerging body of literature termed “behavioral political economy” (see Schnellenbach and Schubert (2015) for a recent survey), as it shows that contextual variables (i.e., days since the most recent election, and the number of elections in the recent past) can influence turnout decisions. While context, by determining instrumental motivation, could be an important driver of voter turnout (Franklin, 2001), it has mostly been neglected in the existing literature.³

More generally, this study relates to a body of literature on the behavioral determinants of (sequential) decision-making (Levay et al., 2010; Danziger et al., 2011). Specifically, recent studies have investigated how choice fatigue and choice overload influence decision-making. For example, by undertaking laboratory and field experiments, Iyengar and Kamenica (2010) investigated how the size of a choice set influences the outcomes of decision-making processes. Iyengar and Lepper (2000) focused on the effect of the size of a choice set on the decision whether to decide. They found that larger choice sets can lead decision-makers to abstain from making a decision. Most closely related to my study, Augenblick and Nicholson (2016) provide evidence in the voting context that more decisions on the same ballot can increase abstention and reliance on decision shortcuts, such as choosing the status quo. This

² While scholars have mentioned the United States and Switzerland as leading examples for settings with a very high election frequency, election frequency can also be very high in Hesse, especially because it does not bundle some local elections. As can be seen in the remainder, some municipalities experienced up to eight elections in less than 24 months.

³ For related research that shows that context matters for voting decisions, see Berger et al. (2008), who show that the location of voting influences election outcomes.

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