



The rain in Spain: Turnout and partisan voting in Spanish elections



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ABSTRACT

This paper uses detailed data on election day rainfall from more than 3000 weather stations as an instrument to estimate the causal effect of turnout on electoral results in Spanish General Elections. The first stage results show that rainfall on election day decreases turnout. Second stage results show that conservatives are greatly hurt by higher turnout. Surprisingly, I find that the main leftwing party is not the beneficiary of higher turnout, but rather other smaller parties. In both stages, I control for local economic conditions and find that higher unemployment increases turnout, and that increases in unemployment benefit the conservative party at the expense of leftwing parties. In combination, the results point to turnout having two components, a more volatile one, which is affected by weather, and a more structural one, which depends on economic conditions such as unemployment.

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1. Introduction

The electoral effects of turnout have long been investigated, but establishing a causal link has been difficult due to the endogeneity between turnout and electoral results: expectations about electoral results will affect voter participation, and these changes in turnout will have electoral consequences. In this paper I estimate the partisan effects of turnout in Spanish elections. To deal with endogeneity I use election day rainfall, which can be seen as an exogenously and randomly imposed voting cost and, therefore, can serve as a valid instrument (see [Hansford and Gomez, 2010](#)).

The econometric model is estimated using data from a large sample of approximately 3000 Spanish municipalities and weather stations. The level of geographic disaggregation and the panel nature of the database allow for the inclusion of a set of fixed municipality effects, election year effects, and election year and region interactions. Because of these inclusions, the only remaining potential sources of bias in the estimates are municipality and year specific characteristics. In order to control for these, I also include variables that capture time-varying local economic conditions within the municipality.

The first stage results show that bad weather on election day matters. Municipalities in which it rained on election day experienced close to half a percentage point less turnout due to rain. The second stage results show that there is a significant negative causal effect of turnout on the vote share of the main Spanish conservative party, the Popular Party (PP). Contrary to widespread beliefs, this paper also finds that the most supported party on the left, the Socialist Party (PSOE), is not the main beneficiary when turnout increases. Instead, increases in turnout benefit other smaller parties. This result stands apart from results obtained for the United States, in which increases in turnout favor the Democratic Party at the expense of the Republican Party (e.g. [Hansford and Gomez, 2010](#)).

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Additionally, the inclusion of factors which capture local economic conditions in the model, such as the unemployment rate, allows for an additional contribution of the paper. I am able to estimate the effect of local economic adversity on both turnout and vote share. In a seminal paper, [Ronsenstone \(1982\)](#) analyzed the theoretical reasons for economic conditions to affect turnout. Specifically, negative economic shocks can have either a positive effect on turnout (mobilization hypothesis), a negative effect (withdrawal effect) or no effect at all (no effect hypothesis). The results found in this paper provide support for the “mobilization” hypothesis which states that people under economic stress are more likely to vote as a way to change their situation. I also study the partisan effects of local economic conditions and find that higher unemployment significantly increases the vote share of the conservative party at the expense of the leftwing parties. Identification of these effects arises from comparing pooled OLS and FE regressions with controls, which shows that the inclusion of fixed municipality effects, election dummies, election–region interactions and municipality specific controls for size and other economic conditions, are likely capturing most sources of confounding variation.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. [Section 2](#) provides background and discusses the relevant literature. Then, I discuss the framework of the analysis and the data sources. [Section 4](#) describes the identification strategy. The main results are presented in [Section 5](#). [Section 6](#) is devoted to robustness checks and extensions. I conclude with a summary of the main findings.

2. Background and relation to the literature

2.1. The partisan effects of voter turnout

At the heart of the rational theory of voting is the idea that the decision to vote will be made after an evaluation of the benefits and the costs of voting. Benefits could be either direct benefits obtained if the voter's preferred party wins the election, or expressive benefits derived from participating in the political process. As the probability of only one voter affecting the outcome of an election is very low, expressive motivations play a fundamental role within rational choice theories on explaining why voters vote (see [Hillman, 2010](#); [Brennan and Brooks, 2013](#)). If the benefits and costs of voting are not randomly distributed across socio-demographic characteristics, variation in turnout is likely to affect parties differently. For example, if non-voters have on average lower income, and lower education and people from lower socio-economic status generally prefer leftwing parties, we would expect an increase in turnout to benefit these parties. Similarly, if higher income voters are more expressive they will have higher turnout rates. If higher income people are also more conservative, increases in turnout would again benefit leftwing parties.¹ This is what [DeNardo \(1980\)](#) called the “composition effect” of turnout.

On the other hand, [DeNardo \(1980\)](#) argued that turnout has another effect that he called the “defection effect”, which benefits minority parties regardless of whether they are rightwing or leftwing. He argued that peripheral voters (those that vote only sometimes) are more likely to defect their usually preferred party than core voters (those who always vote) because peripheral voters have lower partisan attachments. In low turnout elections, when only core voters cast a vote, the majority party in a district benefits because it has more core voters and no one defects. In higher turnout elections, partisan defection increases because more peripheral voters do vote and, therefore, as compared with low turnout elections, minority parties benefit (e.g. a higher number of peripheral voters from the majority party switch to the minority party).

The idea that turnout has partisan effects has also been challenged by [Grofman et al. \(1999\)](#). They suggest that the incumbent party, regardless of its ideology suffers from higher turnout. As in [DeNardo \(1980\)](#) their reasoning lies in the different behavior of peripheral and core voters. Peripheral voters are less likely to support the incumbent compared to core voters, because they do not feel responsible from the status quo arising from other elections in which they did not participate. If this is the case, compared to conservative parties, leftwing parties should only suffer from higher turnout in elections in which leftwing parties have been in power.

Consistent with the effects of turnout on the vote being of different signs, the empirical literature on the partisan effects of turnout has found inconclusive results. Focusing on the United States, some studies such as [Radcliff \(1994\)](#) find that Democrats are favored by higher turnout. Some others support the claim that differences in turnout have no effects on electoral results ([Erikson, 1995](#); [Citrin et al., 2003](#)); and even others argue in favor of DeNardo's two effect hypotheses by showing that Democrats benefit sometimes but are hurt some other times, depending on whether they are the majority party ([Nagel and McNulty, 2000](#)). For countries other than the United States the question has received much less attention, although papers such as [Pacek and Radcliff \(1995\)](#) find empirical evidence consistent with the hypotheses that leftwing parties benefit from higher turnout using data from nineteen different industrialized countries. In the case of Spain, [Lago and Montero \(2010\)](#) do not find evidence of turnout producing strong partisan effects.

Generally, the empirical strategy followed in these studies consists of either using aggregate data and regressing party vote share on turnout, or on using individual survey data to estimate vote choice and then simulate electoral results for non-voters had they voted. In all these cases, turnout is treated as exogenous to electoral results. Turnout, however, is endogenous to partisan vote share because voters decide whether to vote based on their expectations regarding the electoral results. If potential voters expect a low vote share for their preferred party they may vote to avoid other parties' victory; or they may decide not to vote if they think their vote will make no difference for the results ([Downs, 1957](#)). Changes in expected vote share, will, for this reason,

¹ In Spain higher income voters are, on average, more conservative. For example in 2008, the post-election surveys conducted by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas show that 8.6% of conservative voters declare to have incomes higher than 3000 euros a month, while for PSOE the number is 5%.

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