



Gradient constraint in voting: The effect of intra-generational social class and income mobility on turnout



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ABSTRACT

As the connection between an individual's socioeconomic status and electoral participation originates from the socialization process in childhood and adolescence, inequalities in voting are often argued to be relatively stable throughout the life cycle. However, social mobility during adulthood may mitigate the effects of family background. Using individual-level register-based data, this study examines the extent to which changes in adults' social class and income between 2000 and 2011 influenced voting propensity in the 2012 Finnish municipal elections. The results show that turnout among socially mobile voters settles between the stable members of their socioeconomic group of origin and destination. Our findings imply that intra-generational social and economic mobility can constrain the socioeconomic gradient in turnout.

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1. Introduction

As widely recognized among scholars of political behavior, various forms of social inequality are directly reflected in political participation (Wass and Blais, 2017). An important aspect of this phenomenon relates to inter-generational transmission of disadvantage. Patterns of participation are passed on from parents to offspring through learning from parental behavior and transmission of socioeconomic resources (e.g. Bhatti and Hansen, 2012; Brady et al., 2015; Cesarini et al., 2014; Gidengil et al., 2016; Pacheco, 2008; Pacheco and Plutzer, 2008; Quintelier, 2015; Verba et al., 2005). Furthermore, differences in levels of political activity seem relatively persistent during an individual's life cycle (Brady et al., 2015; Plutzer, 2002), which implies that inequalities originating from pre-adult characteristics may cause a permanent bias in participation (Gidengil et al., 2016).

In this study, we argue that the overall picture might not be so gloomy. If socioeconomic resources received later in life can compensate for uneven pre-adult prerequisites for political participation, intra-generational social mobility would mitigate the inequalities stemming from childhood conditions. Although

acknowledged in the previous literature (Brady et al., 2015), the potential effect of intra-generational social mobility has not yet been examined empirically. More specifically, we concentrate on the gradient-constraint hypothesis, originally discovered in population health studies (Bartley and Plewis, 1997, 2007; Blane et al., 1999; Elstad, 2001; for adaptation to another field, see Plewis and Bartley, 2014). Applied to electoral participation, gradient constraint would mean that turnout among upwardly mobile individuals is higher compared to the stable members of their class of origin but lower compared to their class of destination. The situation would be reversed among those whose class status has shifted downwards. As a result, these two types of social mobility would reduce the socioeconomic bias in electoral participation.

To test the gradient-constraint hypothesis, we use a unique dataset that links individual-level voting records from the 2012 Finnish municipal elections with information on socioeconomic background characteristics compiled by Statistics Finland. On the bases of personal identification codes, individuals' social class and income in 2000 and 2011 are matched to voting in the 1999 Finnish parliamentary elections in the dataset. Using actual voting records means that our data are not subject to the bias characteristic to self-reported turnout, such as misreporting due to faulty recall, or over-reporting due to social desirability (Karp and Brockington, 2005; Swaddle and Heath, 1989). Also, the over-reporting of turnout related to the self-selection of the survey respondents (Sciari and

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Goldberg, 2016) is avoided. Neither do the data suffer from potential misreporting stemming from respondents' recollections of their past social class and income.

In what follows, we first discuss the concept of gradient constraint and its applicability in the study of turnout. Next, the data and research design are introduced, followed by presentation of our main results. We conclude by discussing the implications of the findings.

2. Gradient constraint and voting

Originally, the concept of gradient constraint was developed in the field of health inequality studies. Its basic logic is relatively simple, reflecting the association between an individual's health status and socioeconomic position. As the original socioeconomic composition of healthy and less healthy citizens differ from each other, social mobility takes place between social groups with different levels of health (Bartley and Plewis, 1997, 377). A gradient-constraint hypothesis assumes that the health status of the upwardly mobile is better compared to members of their original social class but worse compared to members of their new class. Correspondingly, those moving downwards have worse health profiles than those who stay in their previous social class, although they are still healthier than stayers in their social class of destination. Should this be the case, social mobility mitigates the health disparities between different social classes (Bartley and Plewis, 1997).

In his contribution, Elstad (2001) argued that the social class-health association has to meet three prerequisites in order to have such an alleviating effect: 1) there should be considerable differences in outcome, 2) the overall rate of intra-generational social mobility in the population needs to be high, and 3) there should be a clear direction of causation. Although the gradient-constraint hypothesis has not been tested with regard to political participation and voting, the social class-turnout case fulfills these conditions.

First, numerous studies have reported a class bias in turnout (for review, e.g. Wass and Blais, 2017). Besides age and socio-psychological factors, such as religiosity, party identification and political interest, electoral participation is strongly connected to an individual's socioeconomic position, demonstrated by sharp differences in voting probabilities between various social classes and income groups (e.g. Leighley and Nagler, 2013; for Finland, see Martikainen et al., 2005).

The second criterion, concerning the volume of mobility, is more difficult to assess on the basis of previous research. Unlike inter-generational mobility rates, for which country-specific differences are well documented, comparable literature on intra-generational mobility is not available, probably due to far more demanding data requirements (Breen, 2004, 3). As a small and open economy, Finland is a dynamic society in which education is state-subsidized and other welfare-state benefits promote social mobility (Kvist et al., 2012). This provides grounds to assume at least reasonable levels of intra-generational mobility. Due to lack of appropriate international comparisons, we will rely on our own data to test the level of mobility later in the analysis.

Thirdly, the direction of causality between socioeconomic position and turnout is relatively clear. Although some studies have considered voting as an indicator of social capital (e.g. Macinko and Starfield, 2001), it seems quite unlikely that voting would contribute to social and economic mobility rather than the other way around. However, it is not sufficient only to exclude the possibility of reverse causation. In addition, the possibility of spurious association should be excluded. There should be certain correlates of voting that are influenced by social mobility. We argue that both

permanent and changeable factors account for a person's propensity to vote in elections (Table 1). Whereas the stable elements in voting help to understand why the behavior of the socially mobile resembles that of their class of origin, the changeable elements help to understand why the behavior of movers resembles that of their class of destination.

Biologically heritable predispositions, differences in pre-adult political socialization, habitual character of voting and achieved level of education are the key factors contributing to the stable component in voting. A number of studies argue that there is a genetic predisposition to vote (Deppe et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2008; Fowler and Dawes, 2008; for the opposite result, Charney and English, 2013). Moreover, parents, whether biological or not, have a strong role as socialization agents (Cesarini et al., 2014; Gidengil et al., 2016). Parents may encourage their offspring to vote either by example or via verbal advice (Wass, 2007). Consequently, the parental factors affecting the tendency to vote are likely to be partly biologically inherited and partly socially learned.

In addition, the habitual character of voting (for review, see Aldrich et al., 2011) enhances stability in participation patterns. An individual's first few elections are highly important in developing a voting habit (Franklin, 2004). Those who have adopted the habit of voting in early adulthood usually continue to vote whereas the opposite holds for early non-voters (Plutzer, 2002).

Achieved level of education is one of the strongest individual-level correlates of voting. Although its causal effect on turnout has recently been debated (e.g. Kam and Palmer, 2008; for a review Persson, 2015), education is associated with several indicators of political engagement, such as sense of civic duty, civic skills, political knowledge and political efficacy (Jackson, 1995; Persson, 2015). All of these increase an individual's propensity to vote.¹

Turning to changeable elements in participation patterns, social class and income can be expected to influence voting via various mechanisms. These include resources, social networks, trust in political institutions, as well as assessment of social status and anxiety related to it (Table 1). Social class and income affect many resources that are relevant in accounting for participation, especially money and job skills (Brady et al., 1995). Changes in occupational positions lead to the development of novel skills. The skills required in more prestigious occupations are often those that also tend to foster participation (Brady et al., 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, 22). Income is another factor closely related to social class position (Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2006). By definition, higher income increases an individual's economic resources.

As higher social class is related to more extensive and intensive formal social networks (Pichler and Wallace, 2009), upward social mobility is likely to increase an individual's propensity to become politically mobilized through, for example churches, voluntary associations and political organizations (Rosenstone and Hansen, 2003, 32; Verba et al., 1995, 16–17). In addition, the character of informal social networks might change as a result of social mobility. Exposure to informal social networks in which voting is more common may boost a group pressure to participate and thus influence an individual to develop a sense of civic duty to vote even if such a duty has not been acquired earlier in life.

Changes in social status due to social mobility may also have an

¹ Compared to other stable elements in Table 1, education is admittedly less permanent since an individual's educational qualifications can change even after early adulthood. In practice, however, the proportion of the population whose educational qualifications increase after reaching their thirties is small. (In the follow-up of our study, the proportion of those was 7%). In addition, the direction of the causality is clear since education influences adulthood social class (which, in turn, influences income), whereas changes in social class position do not affect achieved level of education.

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