



To have or not to have: Effects of economic inequality on turnout in European democracies



Carsten Jensen*, Bjarke Bøgeskov Jespersen

Aarhus University, Bartholins Allé 7, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 February 2015

Received in revised form

31 October 2016

Accepted 14 November 2016

Available online 15 November 2016

Keywords:

Turnout

Vote abstention

Inequality

Gini coefficient

GDP per capita

European Social Survey

ABSTRACT

The effect of economic inequality on turnout has received considerable interest recently. Some studies suggest that inequality depresses turnout, others that the relationship is either the other way around or simply non-existent. Employing a large dataset with some 80,000 respondents from 30 European democracies, we show that great care is required when exploring inequality and turnout. On average, there is indeed a negative/positive effect of being below/above the median income in a country – but it is conditioned by inequality (measured as the Gini coefficient) and national wealth (measured as GDP per capita). Moreover, the two country-level factors interact in surprising ways. Based on our results we warn against claims of mono-causal relationships between the economic situation of voters and turnout.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The literature on inequality and turnout is old. Goodin and Dryzek (1980) suggest that when individuals become relatively worse off, their likelihood of voting decreases as they are less likely to be able to influence politics. Others propose a more resource-oriented argument with the effect of inequality seeing a lack of interest in politics among the poor (Brady et al., 1995: 283). Either way, inequality should lead to lower turnout, especially among the poor. Meltzer and Richard (1981) propose a different model where increasing inequality entails higher turnout: the so-called conflict theory. The basic logic is that as inequality rises the middle class has greater incentives to vote to induce governments to redistribute more from the rich.

In recent years the effects of economic inequality on citizens' likelihood to vote have attracted considerable research attention, but with somewhat mixed results. Several studies have shown that inequality depresses turnout not least among the poor (e.g., Anderson and Beramendi, 2008; Solt, 2008, 2010). Others find a negative effect of inequality (Oliver, 2001: 79; Jamie-Castillo, 2009), while others still find no highly conditional or counter-intuitive

effects (e.g., Horn, 2011; Stockemer and Scruggs, 2012; Smets and van Ham, 2013; Stockemer and Parent, 2014; Kasara and Suryanarayan, 2014).

A shortcoming of the existing work is that it does not fully explore the role of all the major potentially relevant material factors at the same time. For one thing, the importance of the relative position of an individual in the income distribution can be argued to be a function of both the position of the individual in the income distribution and the shape of that income distribution. In all countries individuals are scattered across the income distribution: Some are among the poorest 10 per cent (i.e. in the first decile), others are among the richest 10 per cent (i.e. in the 10th decile), while the rest fall in between depending on their earnings. This is a universal feature of all societies, assuming that they are not fully equal, which none are. Yet, in some countries the richest 10 per cent are closer to the poorest 10 per cent than in other countries. For instance, in Sweden the rich are far closer to the poor than is the case in the UK. The overall distribution of income is, in other words, different in different countries.

The difference between an individual's relative position in the income distribution and the shape of that distribution is not trivial (and has been discussed previously in the literature, cf. Anderson and Beramendi, 2008; Solt, 2008). Perhaps it is the relative income alone that matters, because the feeling of inability to affect politics through voting comes about simply from being less well-off

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: carstenj@ps.au.dk (C. Jensen).

than other members of society. This lack of efficacy may or may not be amplified by the overall distribution. After all, if a society is more equal, the individuals occupying the, say, third decile will objectively be, and perhaps also feel, closer to those in the 10th. Likewise, the rich in a very unequal society will have more to fight for, assuming that the feeling of being advantaged has an inherent value to those at the top.

To complicate things neither the relative position of an individual in the income distribution nor the shape of that distribution relates to the general wealth of the society. In wealthier societies those in the first decile will, all else equal, have more to spend than those in the first decile. If the rich are motivated by their fear of redistribution to turn out and vote in bigger numbers than their poorer fellow citizens, one may expect this to be a particularly salient concern in wealthy societies, since this would imply that the rich have more to lose. Much the same logic potentially applies to arguments stressing lack of resources among the disadvantaged. In richer societies being comparably less well-off may matter less, as one in fact still has a lot of the resources necessary for participation.

That said, obviously, it may also matter how a society's wealth is distributed. The UK, for instance, is a wealthy country with a GDP per capita *on par* or above most other European democracies; however, the distribution of that wealth is highly skewed. Importantly, not all countries are like that. Denmark has a GDP per capita close to the British, but a much more equal distribution. Clearly, if both the distribution of income and the level of national wealth matter, they are likely to interact. How they do so will, however, depend on whether inequality and national wealth depress or enhance turnout among the less well-off.

Assuming that inequality depresses turnout among the poor, we can discern two scenarios. In one scenario the two *amplify* each other. In highly unequal and wealthy countries the poor may not only be comparably worse off than the poor in more equal countries, but the rich may, at the same time, have even more resources, augmenting the distance between the rich and the poor in such countries. In another scenario the two factors *counter-balance* each other. The poor in unequal, but wealthy countries may have more relevant resources and, hence, a greater likelihood of voting than the poor in unequal and poor countries. If we, on the other hand, assume that inequality enhances turnout, our expectations change accordingly. In the conflict perspective of Meltzer and Richard, more inequality and greater national wealth mean that the poor have even more to fight for, which should boost turnout. If national wealth or inequality drops, so will turnout among the poor, because their incentives to vote decrease. Essentially, of course, it is an empirical question which of these effects will prevail.

2. Methods

2.1. Data

To explore these issues both country-level data and individual-level data is incorporated in a cross-national research design. The analyses are based on data from the 2002–2010 European Social

Survey and supplemented with country-level variables from World Development Indicators from the World DataBank. Our data contains information about some 80,000 respondents from 30 European countries¹ over the course of five waves of surveys. While earlier studies have mainly tested their hypotheses on rich Western countries, our sample includes a small group of less developed Eastern European countries. The European Social Survey, more importantly, contains the best cross-national measure of household income in existence today, allowing for an exact grouping of respondents into deciles (cf. below). This is vital for us, as we are interested in the effect of relative income.

2.2. Main variables of interest

The dependent variable in this study is turnout at the individual level, and it measures whether an individual voted at the last national election. Studies sometimes use intended voting; however, that measure is subject to potential social desirability effects, where respondents are inclined to answer that they will vote even though they ultimately do not (e.g., [Holbrook and Krosnick, 2010](#)). Since we expect to see an overrepresentation of the relatively poor among non-voters, it is plausible that over-reporting will occur disproportionately in this group. This, in turn, would mean that the effect of relative income would be unduly muted. Actual voting behaviour is, in our opinion, less likely to be subject to the same degree of social desirability effects, assuming that most respondents are more hesitant to misrepresent retrospective facts. However, it is essential to keep in mind that our dependent variable, too, may have a tendency to underestimate the effect of relative income. Comparing the level of self-reported voting with the last national election reveals over-reporting of between two and 16 per cent.²

The main independent variables in the analyses are inequality, national wealth, and relative income of the individual respondent. To capture the latter, a 10-point scale is created placing individuals in income deciles. The variable is merged between two variables, one measuring the household's total net income (for the surveys collected in 2002–2006), and the other measuring the household's total income, after tax and compulsory deductions, from all sources (for the surveys collected in 2008–2010). The income scale is then recoded to measure the distance to the specific countries' median income with a view to identifying whether the individual income falls above or below the median income category. The variable is thus scaled from –4 to 5, where –4 is the fourth decile below the median income category. To get a hold on the potential non-linearity of the effect of this variable on odds for participation, a variable squaring the distance to the median income variable is included. By specifying our relative income measure like this, we replicate [Anderson and Beramendi's \(2008\)](#) approach.

Inequality is measured using the Gini coefficient of the disposable household income per equivalent adult and is derived from the SWIID dataset (version 4.0). SWIID standardizes different measures of income inequality to conform more closely to the standard set by the Luxembourg Income Study. The variable ranges from 0 to a theoretical maximum of 100, where 0 is no inequality. The actual

¹ Austria (2002–2006), Belgium (2002–2010), Bulgaria (2006, 2010), Switzerland (2002–2010), Cyprus (2006, 2010), Czech Republic (2002, 2004, 2008, 2010), Germany (2002–2010), Denmark (2002–2010), Estonia (2008, 2010), Spain (2002–2010), Finland (2002–2010), France (2004–2010), Great Britain (2002–2010), Greece (2002, 2004, 2008, 2010), Croatia (2008, 2010), Hungary (2004, 2008, 2010), Ireland (2004–2010), Israel (2002, 2008, 2010), Italy (2002, 2004), Luxembourg (2002, 2004), the Netherlands (2002–2010), Norway (2002–2010), Poland (2002–2010), Portugal (2002–2010), Russia (2006–2010), Sweden (2002–2010), Slovenia (2002–2010), Slovakia (2004, 2006, 2010), Turkey (2004, 2008, 2010), and Ukraine (2008, 2010).

² One problem with making such an assessment is that it is not always clear what election the respondents were thinking about when answering the question. This means that we should be very careful about being too assertive about exactly how much over-reporting is going on. There are also four countries with instances of under-reporting. This may be a function of a misunderstanding about what national election was meant in the questionnaire, or some other factor we cannot observe. Yet, excluding these four instances from the estimations reported below does not alter the substantial conclusions, though it does make some of the associations a bit stronger.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5115540>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5115540>

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