



The Road Not Taken. Effects of residential mobility on local electoral turnout



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ABSTRACT

Although the effects of population stability on electoral turnout rates are relatively well-known, the role of the characteristics of hosting cities in this relationship are largely unexplored. This paper analyzes the moderating effect of city size on the relationship between residential mobility and electoral turnout. Residential mobility is known to depress civic engagement and political participation at the local level. We argue that this relationship is moderated by the characteristics of hosting cities, approached through city size. The main argument is that smaller cities offer better chances to newcomers to reconnect to the political process. Working with census data from more than 5500 different municipalities, we find that city size has a negative moderating effect on the relationship between residential mobility and turnout. On the one hand, residential mobility and city size do have separate negative effects on turnout, but on the other, the expected negative effects of mobility on turnout are actually stronger in larger than in smaller municipalities. Results indicate, therefore, that smaller communities not only provide more favorable conditions for political participation to their life-long residents, but they also seem to offer newcomers better chances to reconnect to the political process than larger cities.

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1. Introduction

The impact of residential mobility on local electoral turnout has been researched on the basis of two main approaches. The first one focuses on the individual electoral participation of those who change their residence and shows that mobile citizens are less inclined to participate in local elections (Highton, 2000; Knack, 1992; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Squire, Wolfinger, & Glass, 1987; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). A first explanation for this pattern of behavior (in contexts such as the United States) are the administrative costs associated with mobility, such as the need to update or renew voter registration (Highton, 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Regardless of the particular context, mobility imposes social costs given that “mobile citizens report fewer social ties to people in their neighborhood, and social connectedness is a powerful predictor of civic-minded activity” (Berry, Portney, & Thomson, 1993; Gay, 2012; Knack, 1992; Marschall & Stolle, 2004; Putnam, 2000). Both “administrative and social costs of moving may be enough to disrupt the habit of voting for the residentially

mobile” (Gay, 2012).

By contrast, a second approach, focused on the political impact of the population instability of municipalities resulting from residential mobility on their turnout rates is still underdeveloped (Geys, 2006). A common argument underlying these studies is that the local community is “a complex system of friendship and kinship networks and formal and informal associational ties rooted in family life and ongoing socialization processes” (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974), and that population instability across local communities affects these processes in an aggregate manner. In a recent study, Magre, Vallbé, and Tomàs (2016) have shown that not only individuals who move present lower levels of local community engagement, but that communities that experience higher rates of population growth offer less chances to mobile individuals to rebuild their social networks than municipalities that grow in small numbers or even lose population. We contribute to this literature showing that population instability is not enough to explain variation in electoral turnout. In particular, we argue that the effect of population instability on turnout is highly dependent on the size of the municipality.

Drawing on both the literature on the effects of residential mobility, and the “small-is-beautiful” vs. “bigger-is-better” debate around the effects of city size on civic and political engagement

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(Denters, Goldsmith, Ladner, Mouritzen, & Rose, 2014; Kelleher & Lowery, 2004, 2009), we present a model that connects these two issues and presents mobility effects on turnout as a function of city size, which shapes the chances that cities offer to engage civically and politically.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews the main theoretical discussion around mobility, city size, and participation, with a specific focus on residential mobility. In section 3 we present the main argument or model behind this paper, and presents its main hypotheses. Section 4 discusses the data, which includes a discussion on why the data used in the paper is an improvement to previous attempts to assess the effects of mobility or size on turnout. Afterwards, section 5 presents the main empirical results. The paper ends with a discussion on the implications of the results and proposes a number of lines for further research.

2. Mobility, size, and participation

Residential mobility has deep, lasting effects on people's lives. While it certainly can expand mobile individuals' social networks, it changes the structure of friendship and group identification patterns (Oishi, 2010). Most importantly, evidence in psychological science shows that the unrooting-rerooting process involved in mobility may covariate with elements of personality that has lasting effects on mobile people's ability to re-connect their social relationships and, ultimately, on their well-being (Oishi & Schimmack, 2010).

Due to its essential impact on the understanding of the relationship between population and territory, the salience of residential mobility among population geography research has increased notably in the last few years (Coulter, van Ham, & Findlay, 2016; Cresswell, 2010; Tyner, 2013). In this context, evidence from population geography shows a complex relationship between residential mobility and such basic and structural aspects of social and economic life such as life-cycle patterns (Clark, 2013b), as well as its consequences on the economic and social conditions surrounding mobility processes. For instance, Clark (2013a) and Módenes (2010) show that although the U.S. and Spain experienced a similar housing market "bubble" in the beginning of the 2000s, its consequences on the patterns of homeownership and therefore mobility were deeper in Spain, producing structural changes among younger home owners.

Related to this, mobility changes the quality of places and therefore poses relevant challenges to urban planning. In this sense, a well established literature reports that social capital of neighborhoods and local communities are both strong causes and consequences of residential mobility. On the one hand, Kan (2007) and David, Janiak, and Wasmer (2010) model social capital as a cause of mobility and show evidence that higher levels of household or individual social ties deter mobility. On the other, Clark, Deurloo, and Dieleman (2006) show that potential gains in neighborhood and local social capital trigger household mobility.

Mobility also affects the relationship between citizens and politics. Mobility processes combined with economic self-selection and sorting can have relevant effects on electoral outcomes (McKee & Teigen, 2009; Robinson & Noriega, 2010), increase the spatial polarization of the electorate (Bishop, 2009; Johnston et al., 2004) across counties, increase social and political homogeneity within municipal boundaries (Oliver, 2001), and even change the cohort effects on turnout at the local level (Gimpel, Morris, & Armstrong, 2004).

More specifically, mobility also affects local politics. A long and established literature rooted in the sociology of local communities has identified the length of residence as a key factor to allow

individuals to develop the necessary level of community attachment that can lead to political engagement (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Theodori, 2004). There is a widespread consensus on the fact that mobile people turn out at lower rates in both national (Highton, 2000; Squire et al., 1987) and local elections (Magre et al., 2016) than people with longer periods in residence, indicating that mobile citizens need time to update their knowledge and form opinions that can trigger their participation.

Parting from this basic rationale, a few studies have assessed how aggregate levels of residential mobility affect aggregate turnout, spurred both by the known complex relationship between individual and contextual phenomena (Magre et al., 2016; Sellers & Walks, 2013), and by the growing availability of local-level, census data (Gimpel et al., 2004). A classic explanation of this relationship (Alford & Lee, 1968) linked aggregate and individual effects: to the extent that mobile citizens vote less, municipalities that experience high levels of population mobility present lower levels of electoral turnout, for they have large sets of "residents who have lost their ties to social groups and political networks which have been their channels of communication of political stimuli". Framing aggregate mobility as population instability, Geys (2006) concludes that "a more stable population appears to positively affect turnout rates due to higher social pressure and lower information costs", and that "higher (out)-migration may indicate higher non-voting as potential voters might live elsewhere in the near future and are unaffected by local policy". In the same vein, Hoffman-Martinot (1994) argues that population stability increases the sense of identity and solidarity of local communities, thus making voting more likely.

Geys (2006) and Hoffman-Martinot (1994) hint at something relevant: at certain levels, residential mobility somehow distorts the mechanism linking citizens and certain conditions provided by their communities that may help either foster (e.g., social pressure, solidarity) or depress (e.g., information costs, loss of social ties) the likelihood of voting.

These contextual, local conditions shape a geography of 'places' in the sense of "the settings in which people find themselves on a regular basis in their daily lives where many contexts come together and with which they may identify" (Agnew, 2007), from which political behavior may be better understood. In the study of political participation at the local level, the size of local communities has provided a useful measure to capture distinct local contexts, which in turn has led to a "size argument"—i.e., whether the size of local communities has an effect on turnout. Two main positions have shaped the debate—"small-is-beautiful" as opposed to "bigger-is-better" (Kelleher & Lowery, 2004).¹ Overall, empirical evidence has supported the hypothesis that smaller communities foster attachment, civic participation, and electoral turnout, while larger communities tend to depress it (Blais, 2000; Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Denters et al., 2014; Geys, 2006; Oliver, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972). These results seem to support the idea that network density works in favor of civic engagement and participation, and therefore that small cities are a better scenario for the mechanisms that lead to electoral turnout to work successfully than larger communities (what Oliver (2001) calls *civic capacity*²), although the positive effects of "smallness" may be sensitive to the influence of other contextual (Kelleher & Lowery, 2004; Tavares & Carr, 2013; Carr & Tavares, 2014; Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000; Costa & Kahn,

¹ In a recent work, Denters et al. (2014) update these labels and call them the "Lilliput argument" (small is beautiful) and the "Brobdingnag argument" (bigger is better).

² Oliver (2001) referred to civic capacity as "the extent to which a community's residents are voluntarily engaged and connected with the public realm through both political and civic activities", which he observed in smaller cities.

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