



## Term limits and voter turnout

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### ABSTRACT

This paper studies the impact of binding term limits on voter turnout, analyzing the Portuguese experience at the local government level, where the institutional reform was exogenously imposed by the national parliament. Although instrumental, expressive, and information-based theories of voter participation imply effects of term limits on turnout, this is clearly an under-researched topic. Applying a difference-in-differences approach to data at both the municipal and parish levels, we find robust evidence that the presence of term-limited incumbents has a positive impact on voter participation.

### 1. Introduction

In democratic societies, public decisions should reflect the will of citizens. Elections allow voters to choose their representatives, i.e. those who have the power to take public decisions. Therefore, the citizens' decision of whether to vote or not has political and economic consequences. For several decades, many scholars have studied the determinants of voter participation. There is now an extensive and fast-growing literature on voter turnout, which covers a wide variety of its potential socio-economic, political and institutional determinants (Cancela and Geys, 2016). However, quite surprisingly, this huge literature has devoted very little attention to the effects that term limits may have on voter participation.

The main purpose of the present study is to help fill this gap in the literature by studying the impact of binding term limits on voter turnout, using the Portuguese case as a quasi-natural experiment. A law approved in 2005 stipulates that mayors and parish presidents cannot serve for more than three consecutive terms in the same municipality or parish. This law became binding in the 2013 local elections, preventing 52% of the mayors and 29% of the parish presidents from running for reelection. This led to a significant turnover of local candidates, which may have affected voter turnout. Thus, we check if voter participation in a municipality/parish was influenced or not by the presence of a term-limited incumbent.

Term limits have existed for a long time at the presidential level in countries such as the United States. More recently, mainly since the late 1980s, several American states also imposed term limits to governors and legislators. Countries such as Brazil, Italy and, subsequently

Portugal, introduced term limits at the municipal level. There is a growing literature studying a wide range of potential effects of term limits on matters such as public policy, electoral competition and campaign finance, career decisions, effort of legislators, corruption, pork-barrel, and political budget cycles.<sup>1</sup> But, to the best of our knowledge, there is only a couple of empirical studies analyzing directly the effect of term limits on voter turnout. Focusing on California, Hajnal and Lewis (2003) examine the effects of several local institutional arrangements, including term limits, on voter turnout. Most of the data were gathered through a mail questionnaire which asked city clerks to report on the city's most recent mayoral and city council elections. Their results indicate that term limits, at either the council or the mayoral levels, do not have a direct effect on citywide participation rates. Nalder (2007) analyzes the effects of state legislative term limits using data from state legislative races, also in California, from 1976 to 2004. Contrary to the claims of term limits advocates, she found evidence of a negative effect of term limits to state legislators on voter turnout.

We believe that our research on the Portuguese recent experience with binding term limits can move forward the literature on this topic in several ways. First, the introduction of term limits at the local level provides a unique opportunity to analyze the consequences of this institutional reform on voter turnout. We do it by applying a difference-in-differences approach to panel datasets comprising all 308 Portuguese municipalities and 2163 parishes. Second, the consequences of binding term limits on voter participation have, so far, been empirically studied only for California. Other states' and countries' experiences, especially at the local/municipal level, may provide useful insights for countries

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<sup>1</sup> See Carey et al. (2006) for an analysis of the impact of term limits on state legislative representation in the 50 US states, and Mooney (2009) for a literature survey.

with similar institutional systems. Third, while in the US the states decide on the adoption of term limits, and term-limit laws vary from state to state, in Portugal the institutional reform was exogenously imposed by the national parliament, and the same law applies to all local governments, rendering the estimation of the term-limit treatment effect less problematic than when cross-state or cross-country datasets are used. As [Herrera et al. \(2014, p. 132\)](#) point out, empirical studies on turnout based on cross-national comparisons are likely to suffer from a number of confounding variables and measurement challenges. Finally, our results indicating that voter participation in Portuguese local elections is higher in the presence of a term-limited incumbent suggest a potential positive contribution of term limits to democracy and gives new hopes to term limits advocates.

## 2. Voter participation and term limits

A fundamental question in democratic societies is why citizens vote at all. According to rational choice theory, the decision of whether to vote or not depends on the benefits and costs individuals expect to derive from the act of voting. The benefits depend on the expected utility of electing the preferred candidate and on the probability that the vote is pivotal. However, since the latter is usually very small and easily outweighed by the trouble of going to the voting station, the expected payoff of voting is nearly zero ([Downs, 1957](#); [Owen and Grofman, 1984](#)). Yet, many people actually vote, a phenomenon known as the paradox of voting ([Fiorina, 1976](#); [Grofman, 1993](#)).

Theoretical contributions explaining observed participation levels at elections<sup>2</sup> can be grouped into five approaches<sup>3</sup>: instrumental, expressive, ethical, group-based, and information-based. Instrumental theories presume that individuals vote because they care mainly about the consequences of the electoral process, including the need to avoid the collapse of democracy ([Downs, 1957](#)). Under this assumption, when elections are close races the payoffs of voting increase because the probability of a single vote being pivotal is higher, which leads to higher turnout ([Downs, 1957](#); [Riker and Ordeshook, 1968](#); [Blais, 2000](#); [Ali and Lin, 2013](#); [Dubois and Leprince, 2017](#)). Expressive theories suggest that people derive utility from expressing their views and attitudes when voting, and the utility from voting may increase from bandwagon effects in elections ([Fiorina, 1976](#); [Brennan and Brooks, 2013](#); [Blais and Galais, 2016](#)). Explanations based on the ethical voter hold that individuals are altruistic, and consider the utilities of others when voting ([Goodin and Roberts, 1975](#)). Group-based theories explore the co-ordination mechanisms between members of a group of voters (namely, parties) that may increase the likelihood of determining the outcome of the election ([Filer et al., 1993](#); [Grossman and Helpman, 2001](#)). Finally, the last group of theories highlights the importance of information on the decision of whether to vote or not. It argues that less informed voters may be better off delegating their decision to informed voters ([Feddersen and Pesendorfer, 1996](#); [1999](#); [Matsusaka, 1995](#)).

Since the 1960s, numerous studies have analyzed empirically the determinants of voter turnout.<sup>4</sup> The explanatory variables used in turnout studies are generally grouped into three main categories: socio-economic, political, and institutional ([Geys, 2006](#); [Cancela and Geys, 2016](#)). Regarding socio-economic variables, population size, concentration, and proportion of minorities are generally found to have negative effects on turnout, while population stability, income and

ethnic homogeneity, education, and past turnout have positive effects. As for political variables, close elections, campaign expenditures, and higher political fragmentation are found to promote turnout. Institutional variables are arguably the most powerful determinants of turnout ([Franklin, 1996](#)). Proportional electoral systems seem to increase turnout relative to majoritarian/plurality systems ([Blais and Aarts, 2006](#)). Additionally, compulsory voting and concurrent elections generally promote turnout, while more stringent registration requirements tend to decrease it ([Garmann, 2016](#); [Jaitman, 2013](#)). Taking advantage of a larger sample of studies, [Cancela and Geys \(2016\)](#) separately analyze the determinants of turnout in national and subnational elections. They find that campaign expenditures, closeness of elections and registration requirements have greater explanatory power in national election studies, while population size and composition, concurrent elections, and the electoral system are more important in subnational elections.

It is surprising that the empirical literature on the determinants of voter turnout has almost ignored the potential effects of term limits. The explanations of voter turnout underlying instrumental, expressive voting, and information-based theories provide us good reasons to believe that term limits may influence turnout. First, instrumental theories suggest that term limits may increase voter participation by making elections more competitive. By forcing out incumbents, they increase the number of open seats which is likely, not only to increase competition by removing the incumbency advantage, but also to attract more quality candidates ([Bianco, 1984](#); [Jacobson, 1997](#)), and to increase campaigning efforts by parties ([Cox and Munger, 1989](#)). Therefore, term limits are likely to increase turnout. Second, by ousting entrenched and disconnected incumbents, the term limits may inspire more citizen confidence in the system, increase the utility derived from expressing one's preferences, and lead to bandwagon effects. Finally, information-based theories predict both a positive and a negative effect of term limits on voters' mobilization. On the one hand, they may increase voter confusion and disinterest by introducing a greater number of "unknown" non-incumbents into electoral contests, leading to lower turnout. But, on the other hand, particularly at the time of the introduction of the institutional change, media coverage of local elections may increase significantly, decreasing the costs of acquiring relevant information for voters.

We contribute to this scarce literature on the effects of term limits on voter turnout by analyzing the effects of the presence of a term-limited incumbent on voter participation at Portuguese municipal elections.

## 3. The Portuguese setting

Portugal is a unitary state, with 308 municipalities, all subject to the same legal and institutional framework. Each municipality is then subdivided into a varying number of parishes (*freguesias*), of which there are currently 3092 (they were 4260 before the territorial reorganization of parishes of 2013). Municipalities have a deliberative branch, the Municipal Assembly, and an executive branch, the Municipal Council. More than half of the Municipal Assemblies' members are elected directly by voters, and the remaining members are the presidents of the parishes' assemblies that belong to the municipality, who are also elected directly by voters. The mayor is the president of the Municipal Council and has a prominent role in the executive branch. Besides the mayor, the Municipal Council includes between four to sixteen additional members, depending on the number of voters registered in the municipality. All of its members are elected directly by voters, who vote on party or independent closed lists. The elections for the Municipal Assembly, the Municipal Council and the Parish

<sup>2</sup> For reviews of the literature see [Dhillon and Peralta \(2002\)](#), [Mueller \(2003\)](#), [Feddersen \(2004\)](#), [Blais \(2006\)](#) and [Goldfarb and Sigelman \(2010\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> Some surveys consider additional approaches, namely the minimax regret strategy and game theoretic models. Given that the minimax regret strategy is extremely conservative, and that game theory did not succeed in rescuing the rational voter hypothesis (see [Mueller, 2003, p. 307](#)), we do not explicitly consider them in our analysis.

<sup>4</sup> A recent meta-analysis ([Cancela and Geys, 2016](#)) considers 185 studies of turnout using aggregate-level data. This literature is not only numerous, but is also fast-growing, as a previous version of that meta-analysis ([Geys, 2006](#)) included just 83 studies published between 1968 and 2004.

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