



A behavioral measure of the enthusiasm gap in American elections

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ABSTRACT

What are the effects of a mobilized party base on elections? I present a new behavioral measure of the enthusiasm gap in a set of American elections to identify how the turnout rate of the party faithful varies across different contexts. I find that the advantaged party can see its registrants turn out by four percentage points more than the disadvantaged party in some elections, and that this effect can be even larger in competitive House districts. I estimate the net benefit to party vote share of the mobilized base, which is around one percentage point statewide, and up to one and one half points in competitive House contests. These results suggest that the partisan characteristics of an election have consequences not just for vote choice, but for the composition of the electorate.

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How large are the effects of a mobilized party base on the composition of the electorate and on party vote shares in American elections? The enthusiasm gap, where one political party's supporters in the electorate are more mobilized than those of other parties' supporters, is often proposed as an important determinant of election results. Pollsters at Gallup believe *enthusiasm* to be crucial,¹ and journalists also attribute election results to the behavior of parties' core supporters.² Political strategists, too, turned

towards mobilizing the base in the 2000s as an electoral strategy, thinking it a more promising route to electoral success than trying to persuade swing voters.³

Though not phrased as *enthusiasm*, political science theory and evidence suggest that in each election, an interaction between election context (candidates, state of the times, and issues) and Americans' longstanding attachments to the parties should be related to their decision whether or not to vote (Downs, 1957; Campbell et al., 1960; Campbell, 1960; Converse, 1966; DeNardo, 1980). More recent research shows that campaign spending and field offices correlate with voter turnout (e.g., Caldeira and Patterson, 1982; Holbrook and McClurg, 2005; Masket, 2009), that get-out-the-vote activities have a causal effect on turnout (Gerber and Green, 2000; Green and Gerber, 2008), and that parties and campaigns exert effort to

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¹ "Gallup has found that voting enthusiasm generally relates to the eventual election outcome in midterm and presidential election years. In election years in which one party has a clear advantage on enthusiasm, that party tends to fare better in the midterm elections or win the presidential election." Frank Newport, "Republicans Less Enthusiastic About Voting in 2012," December 8, 2011, [Gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com/poll/151403/republicans-less-enthusiastic-voting-2012.aspx), retrieved at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/151403/republicans-less-enthusiastic-voting-2012.aspx>.

² As the *New York Times* editorial concluded following the 2010 midterm elections, when the Republicans picked up 63 House seats and six Senate seats, the Republicans "had succeeded in turning out their base, and ... the Democrats had failed to rally their own (Editorial, "Election 2010," *New York Times*, November 3, 2010, A26)."

³ The Bush–Cheney 2004 reelection campaign made a widely-publicized decision to focus more of its resources on turning out the conservative base than persuading swing voters. Strategists Matthew Dowd and Karl Rove determined that seven percent or fewer of presidential voters were truly persuadable, and so 2004 could be won through a more effective mobilization strategy ("Karl Rove – The Architect," *PBS Frontline*, April 2005, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/architect/rove/2004.html>).

mobilize their core supporters to come to the polls (which evidence suggests is successful, e.g., [Holbrook and McClurg, 2005](#); [McGhee and Sides, 2011](#)). Further, Americans' views about the appropriate size of government seem to cycle over time ([Erikson et al., 2002](#)), suggesting that at some elections more conservative members of the citizenry would be motivated to influence election outcomes, while at other elections, more liberal members of the citizenry would be motivated to effect change.

Despite the potential importance of differential mobilization between partisan bases in the electorate suggested by both practitioners and scholars, we lack good measures of the size and effect of a mobilized party base. The Gallup measure of the enthusiasm gap is based on answers to survey questions not directly related to actual turnout or vote share.⁴ Political science measures tend to estimate the effects of specific party activities ([Caldeira and Patterson, 1982](#); [Holbrook and McClurg, 2005](#); [Masket, 2009](#); [McGhee and Sides, 2011](#)), or the effect of changes in overall turnout separate from partisanship (e.g., [DeNardo, 1980](#); [Erikson, 1995](#); [Nagel and McNulty, 1996](#); [Citrin et al., 2003](#); [Martinez and Gill, 2005](#)). These studies do not, however, estimate the magnitude of the change in composition of the electorate due to a mobilized base. Nor is the net effect of that mobilized base on election outcomes identified. I present here an effort to do both.

In this essay, I offer a new behavioral measure of changes in partisan turnout from statewide voter files to connect partisanship and participation. I adopt the term *enthusiasm gap* to characterize this measure. Put simply, I measure the difference in turnout in a single election between Democrats and Republicans who would normally turn out to vote at the same rate. This behavioral measure of the enthusiasm gap offers three distinct advantages. First, the behavioral measure is more closely related than other measures to the theoretical idea that in some elections, one party is advantaged by the motivation of its core supporters in the electorate. Second, the millions of observations in the statewide voter file characterizing the entire electorate allow me to estimate how the enthusiasm gap varies across U.S. House districts and the varying level of salience of these contests. This allows me to measure the extent to which differential gaps in partisan turnout occur concurrently across districts, due to national tides for example, or if they vary with the effort and context of the contest in each House district. Third, I estimate the effect of the changes in partisan turnout on vote shares, providing a measure of how a “good year” for one party influences vote share through the turnout choices of the party base.

Using the records of registered voters from state voter files and respondents to election surveys in Florida in election years 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2010, I find that the turnout of partisan registrants who would normally vote at similar rates can vary with partisanship by up to four percentage points across the electorate, and more so in competitive House races. I find that this differential turnout

Table 1

Enthusiasm gap in turnout by party of registration in three elections in Florida.

Election	Democrat turnout	Republican turnout
2006	76.2 (N = 1,687,702)	77.0 (N = 1,734,441)
2008	90.1 (N = 1,622,176)	91.1 (N = 1,668,173)
2010	72.8 (N = 1,551,685)	78.7 (N = 1,638,142)

Note: Cell entries are the percentage of registered voters in Florida who voted in both 2002 and 2004 who voted in the election of that row. Party of registration is measured at the time of the election in that row (registrants of other parties and non-partisans are excluded from the tabulations).

can influence statewide vote share by close to one percent, and vote share in competitive House contests by up to one and one half percent. I believe the estimates on vote share to be conservative. I find that differential turnout benefitted Democrats in 2006 and 2008, and Republicans in 2004 and 2010. I also find variation in the size of the enthusiasm gap by the competitiveness of the House contest, providing evidence that partisan turnout is to a measurable degree a function of the local campaign environment and not solely national tides.

I proceed by first presenting an example and definition of the enthusiasm gap, formally defining its measurement, presenting data sources and estimation, presenting estimates for statewide enthusiasm gaps in four elections and estimates by House district competitiveness in two midterms, and concluding with estimates of the net benefit to partisan vote share of the enthusiasm gap in each election.

1. Factors of differential partisan participation

As an initial example of the enthusiasm gap in practice, consider the rates of turnout by party of registration presented in [Table 1](#). I take all of the registered voters in the state of Florida who voted both in the 2002 midterm election and the 2004 presidential election and tabulate their turnout in the 2006 midterm, the 2008 presidential, and the 2010 midterm.⁵ Looking only at voters who turned out in 2002 and 2004 is a simple way to hold constant the long-term components of turnout (which I estimate more carefully below).⁶ In both 2006 and 2008, Republican registrants who had voted in both 2002 and 2004 were about one percentage point more likely to turn out than Democratic registrants who had voted in both 2002 and 2004. But in 2010, Republican registrants who had voted in both 2002 and 2004 were almost six points more likely to turn out than Democrats who had voted in both 2002 and 2004. This increase in *relative* turnout is the enthusiasm gap.

A variety of factors could generate these relative differences in turnout. I classify these factors into two broad categories: global causes, which operate on the entire electorate, and local causes, which are specific to local contests. The existing literature suggests a variety of global

⁵ I present details and data sources in the empirical section below.

⁶ [Table 1](#) represents registrants who were eligible to vote in 2002, implicitly excluding new registrants. I make this choice here for clarity of the example. In the full analysis, I include in my calculation of the enthusiasm gap and its effects registrants new to the election of interest.

⁴ Gallup asks survey respondents about their enthusiasm to vote in an upcoming election, and compares the responses of Democrats and Republicans to infer the likely partisan composition of the electorate.

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