



The effect of congruence in policy priorities on electoral participation

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that voters are more likely to turn out at elections if candidates and parties address their issue concerns in the election campaign. Voters with high levels of congruence in policy priorities should perceive the campaign as more interesting and the election as more relevant. In addition, the costs associated with the vote choice should be lower if voters' policy priorities are salient. The effect should be weakened by party identification, which acts both as a mobilising force and as a heuristic to the vote choice, making information costs less detrimental to turnout. The analysis, which links voter survey data with candidate survey and media content data from the 2009 German federal election, confirms the hypotheses.

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1. Introduction

Electoral participation is considered vital for the functioning and the legitimacy of representative democratic systems. Hence, a tremendous amount of research has been dedicated to explaining individual and aggregate-level differences in turnout. We can distinguish between a number of individual-level approaches, including sociological, psychological, and rational choice frameworks (Smets and van Ham, 2013). The latter perspective, building on the Downsian spatial model, models voters' probability of turning out by looking at voters' policy positions in relation to parties' or candidates'. If none of the competitors is close enough to represent a voter's preferences or if they are equally proximate, the voter is more likely to abstain (e.g. Adams et al., 2006; Adams and Merrill, 2003; Adams et al., 2005; Downs, 1957; Plane and Gershtenson, 2004; Thurner and Eymann, 2000).

This paper takes a related but novel approach by focussing on an aspect of policy preferences that has so far

been largely overlooked in turnout research, namely congruence between voters' and parties' policy priorities. Issue priorities are understood here as the policy issues that are considered as currently most in need of being addressed. Priorities are an important element of policy preferences that is distinct from policy positions, particularly in the case of spatial issues (Downs, 1957). Accordingly, the mechanisms linking voter-elite congruence in priorities to turnout proposed here differ from those brought forth in the spatial voting literature.

I argue that voters whose issue concerns are reflected on elites' agendas in the election campaign are more likely to turn out at the ballot box than voters whose issue priorities are neglected by parties and in the media's campaign coverage. This is because, first, voters with high priority congruence levels should be more motivated to turn out. They should perceive the campaign as more interesting and the election outcome as more important. In addition, voters whose concerns are salient should have higher levels of confidence in the functioning of the democratic process.

Second, voters who care about the same issues as parties and candidates should find the vote choice easier. If voters evaluate parties based on their own issue priorities, which is suggested in much of the issue voting literature

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(e.g. Abramowitz, 1995; Belanger and Meguid, 2008; Fournier et al., 2003; Krosnick, 1989), they will be provided with more information about parties' stances and competences on these issues if they are salient among parties. Similarly, if voters base their party choice on the issues emphasised by parties (de Vries, 2009; Rabinowitz et al., 1982), they will be better equipped to evaluate parties if they also care about these issues. Lower information costs due to priority congruence should, in turn, increase turnout.

We can thus identify two broad mechanisms that link priority congruence with turnout. However, they should be more – and potentially only – applicable to voters who do not identify with a political party. Since party identification is a very powerful mobilising factor and facilitates the vote choice by serving as a cognitive heuristic, it should be able to compensate for the demobilising effects of a lack of priority congruence.

After explaining the arguments in more detail below, I test the hypotheses using data from the 2009 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). Priority congruence is measured by a novel indicator that measures the salience of voters' issue priorities among party candidates as well as in the television and print news media coverage of the election campaign. The results confirm that the likelihood of participation increases among non-partisans if their policy priorities are salient in the media coverage of the election campaign, while party identifiers have high turnout rates regardless. This result holds when controlling for voters' ideological distance to parties, suggesting that priority congruence influences turnout independently from proximity in policy positions.

The insights of this paper thus represent an important addition to our knowledge about why individual differences in electoral participation exist. They also warn us that particularly voters who tend to be less integrated into the political process anyway, namely non-partisans, are likely to become more politically alienated if their policy concerns are not given sufficient attention. This exacerbates their risk of withdrawal from political life. In this respect, the results of this paper underscore existing evidence that citizens whose policy preferences are not well represented tend to be less satisfied with the democratic process (Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2011; Kim, 2009; Muller, 1970; Reher, 2013).

2. Theory and hypotheses

A major claim in the literature on spatial models of turnout is that a lack of representation of voters' issue preferences leads to alienation and, consequently, abstention (Adams et al., 2006; Adams and Merrill, 2003; Adams et al., 2005; Brody and Page, 1973; Hinich and Ordeshook, 1969; Kirchgassner, 2003; Plane and Gershtenson, 2004; Thurner and Eymann, 2000; Zipp, 1985). Building on Downs' (1957) economic model of voting, this literature assumes that a voter is likely to abstain if all or several candidates or parties are equally close to the voter's position, making the voter *indifferent* towards the election outcome. Abstention also occurs if a voter's distance to the closest contestant exceeds a certain threshold, for in this case she will be *alienated* because no contender represents

her policy preferences well enough to motivate her to bear the costs of voting.

In such spatial models of electoral behaviour, the focus lies on voters' and parties' positions on ideological and issue dimensions. The salience of issues is usually only considered relevant as a determinant of the relative importance of different policy dimensions (Abramowitz, 1995; Giger, 2011). In contrast, I argue that issue salience plays a much more central role: Agreement between voters and parties on the relative importance of issues should influence turnout in itself, independently from distance in issue positions. More specifically, it should influence voters' motivation to turn out and the costs associated with it.

The distinction between policy positions and policy priorities is thus crucial to my argument. In the case of spatial issues in the Downsian tradition, issue priorities are only very weakly related to issue positions, if at all. Different parties and voters may pay a lot of attention to the same issues, such as welfare spending, while pursuing radically different policy aims, i.e., increasing or decreasing spending. In turn, actors may be located at the same position on an issue dimension, for instance pro same-sex marriage, but assign very different levels of importance to this issue.¹ Here, priority congruence should affect turnout *in addition* to the alienation and indifference mechanisms in the positional framework. In the case of valence issues (Clarke et al., 2009; Green, 2007; Stokes, 1963), positions do not vary by definition, and hence the spatial mechanisms of indifference and alienation do not apply. Congruence in priorities on these issues, on the other hand, should influence turnout, as I explain below.

2.1. Priority congruence and the motivation to turn out

If political parties and candidates do not devote much attention in their campaigns to the issues that are most important to a voter, she is likely to find the campaign and the election to be not very interesting and may thus be less motivated to turn out. Moreover, she will have the impression that the issues she would like to see addressed by policy will not be on the government's agenda after the election. As a result, the election outcome will have low relevance to her. Whether one party represents her positions better than another only really becomes relevant if she cares about the issues that will be part of the policy debate (Jones and Baumgartner, 2004; Spoon and Klüver, 2014).

In contrast, a voter who considers the issues that are salient in the campaign as important should perceive the campaign and the election as stimulating and relevant (Campbell, 1960). She will feel that it will make a difference which parties will be represented in parliament and government after the election, since the policies proposed by

¹ The Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Volkens et al., 2013) considers issue positions and salience to be more closely related as it measures parties' positions on spatial issues based on their salience. However, the CMP's issue categories are already more indicative of positions and ideology than the categories used in this paper. Compare, for instance, the CMP's categories 'military: positive' and 'military: negative' to the category 'defence' used in this study (cf. Fig. 1).

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