



# Concurrent elections and turnout: Causal estimates from a German quasi-experiment



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## ABSTRACT

Conventional wisdom suggests that scheduling elections concurrently with other contests increases turnout. However, causal empirical evidence in favor of this claim is scarce, at best. Moreover, it is a priori unclear whether theory would predict a higher turnout if two low-office elections are combined instead of a combination of a low-office election and a major electoral race. Using a quasi-experiment and a difference-in-differences estimation approach at the German municipality-level, I provide evidence that combining two low-office elections significantly increases turnout.

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## 1. Introduction

Declining voter turnout in several Western democracies, at different layers of governments, has recently generated interest from both academia and public policy on the causes and consequences of voter turnout<sup>1</sup>. From a normative perspective, it is debatable whether a high turnout is beneficial. A high turnout might lead to a more equal representation, but this might bring more uninformed voters to the polls, thus potentially leading to poor choices. In line with this argument, theoretical research has shown that a low turnout can lead to a better selection of political agents (Ghosal and Lockwood, 2009). Therefore, policies adopted to increase turnout such as compulsory voting might not always be welfare increasing (Krasa and Polborn, 2009). Empirical evidence indeed suggests that a low turnout increases the chances of selecting higher valence

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in Germany, voter turnout at federal elections decreased from 82.2% in 1998 to 71.1% in 2013. In 1972, voter turnout was at its highest level of 91.1%. At the local level in Germany, the decrease was even more severe. In some states, turnout at local elections decreased by more than 20 percentage points in less than 20 years. Similar experiences have been observed in, among others, national elections in the United Kingdom and elections to the European parliament. Moreover, turnout is persistently at low levels in countries such as Switzerland and the United States (Kobach, 1993; Franklin, 2001).

candidates (Lo Prete and Revelli, 2014) and that policies adopted to increase turnout brings citizens with less education and political knowledge to the polls (Hodler et al., 2015). Moreover, empirical evidence shows that providing information increases turnout, thus suggesting that a low level of information could be a main driver of abstention (Banerjee et al., 2014; Kendall et al., 2015).

The fact that high voter participation is often considered an indicator of the legitimacy of the democratic process (e.g., Lijphart, 1997) motivates nonetheless the enormous attention that low turnout receives, as well as the need to search for remedies. Past research argues that individual-level variables, such as age, education, or income, cannot fully explain the large (cross-country) differences in voter turnout (e.g., Franklin, 2001). Moreover, these variables are not easily changeable in the short-run. As a result, institutional remedies naturally come to the fore<sup>2</sup>.

What institutional changes can be made to enhance voter turnout? To answer this question, recent literature has, for example, investigated whether compulsory voting or introducing postal voting can causally influence voter turnout (e.g., Funk, 2010; Fowler, 2013; Jaitman, 2013; Hodler et al., 2015). However, apart from a few such exceptions, there is limited research on the causal effects of an election's institutional design on voter turnout. In particular, the election schedule, often suggested by political commentators and party strategists as an instrument to influence election outcomes, has rarely been subjected to causal tests. The election schedule is especially important because it could be a relatively easy policy measure to influence turnout.

An often-mentioned institutional remedy for low voter turnout is concurrent elections. In fact, it has even become conventional wisdom that concurrent elections *cause* higher turnout. However, that this causal relationship has become such an unquestioned fact is quite surprising, as there is scarce, if any, evidence to support it<sup>3,4</sup>. The only such study based on a quasi-experimental setup is that of Anzia (2012). She compares – via a difference-in-differences approach – districts that, owing to a Texas law, were forced to switch to on-cycle elections with districts that could decide whether to hold on- or off-cycle elections. However, owing to data unavailability, the number of observations is very low (110), and no evidence for common trends across treatment and control groups is reported.

Existing research that estimates the association of concurrent elections with turnout shows mixed results. In a meta-analysis, Geys (2006) reports that less than 60% of all surveyed studies find a statistically significantly positive association (at the 5% level). Studies that find a significantly positive association are, e.g., Hess (2002), Hajnal et al. (2002), and Berry and Gersen (2011). By contrast, some studies observe no significant association (Aguar-Conraria and Magalhães, 2010) or even a significantly negative one (Michelsen et al., 2014, for European elections). However, the literature typically ignores three important features. First, whether elections are held concurrently with other elections is, in general, the result of (strategic) self-selection by jurisdictions<sup>5</sup>. Thus, jurisdictions with concurrent elections might be fundamentally different (e.g., in terms of political preferences or the composition of the electorate) from those with non-concurrent elections. Second, it is plausible that the turnout at lower-level jurisdiction elections is influenced not by the concurrence of elections, but by general time effects in election years for higher offices. For example, around presidential and senatorial elections, it is likely that the electorate is much more polarized than at other times. Thus, even if elections were not held concurrently, turnout could be higher around major electoral races.

Third, most studies examine the effect of holding a low-office election concurrently with major national or state elections. A potential theoretical reason for a higher turnout in concurrent elections – motivated by the typically higher turnout in high-office elections than in low-office elections – is that voters will vote for the high-office election anyway. Then, since they are already at the voting booth, the marginal transportation costs for the low-office election are effectively zero. However, it is not clear why this argument should hold for a bundle of low-office elections, i.e., why should voters be motivated to vote in the one low-office election if they do not plan to vote in the other<sup>6</sup>? Accordingly, a setting in which low-office elections are combined could be a more conservative one than when a low-office election is combined with a major election.

Moreover, the question of whether a bundle of low-office elections attracts a higher turnout has significant practical relevance. It is more often the case that elections for the same government level are held concurrently than are elections for different government tiers. For example, Karnig and Walter (1977) surveyed all US municipalities, and found that only 17% hold local elections concurrently with state or national elections. Some German states even prohibit combining local elections with major national or state races<sup>7</sup>. For example, until 1998, this was the case in the state of Hesse (Dreßler, 1998), which I consider in this study.

<sup>2</sup> Charles and Stephens (2013) even report causal evidence that higher wages lead to a *lower* turnout.

<sup>3</sup> This study is also related to recent political science literature that regards the election schedule as a natural experiment and uses it to instrument for turnout (e.g., Berry and Gersen, 2011; Anzia, 2011; Lo Prete and Revelli, 2014). Fukumoto and Horiuchi (2011) even advise political scientists to use election timing as an exogenous predictor for several outcomes. However, Hartney and Nickerson (2012) provide compelling evidence that election timing is not randomly assigned and, therefore, could be endogenous. My study contributes to this literature by generating exogenous variation in the timing of elections.

<sup>4</sup> Fukumoto and Horiuchi (2015) primarily make omitted variable bias responsible for the failure to estimate the precise effect of concurrency on turnout.

<sup>5</sup> In a related study, Meredith (2009) reports evidence that strategic timing also occurs for direct-democratic legislation.

<sup>6</sup> A possible reason for a higher turnout when two low-office elections are combined could be that these elections attract different sets of voters. However, whether this is the case has not been tested empirically yet.

<sup>7</sup> The prohibition of combining local level elections with higher-tier elections in Hesse meant that while it was allowed to hold these elections on the same day, it was, for example, not allowed to use the same location. Since some potential benefits of concurrent elections could therefore not materialize before 1998, only in a handful of municipalities, the same date for two elections was chosen.

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