POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND VOTER TURNOUT IN THE INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACIES

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Differences in voter turnout among industrial democracies are a function of political institutions and electoral law. Specifically, the presence of nationally competitive electoral districts provides incentives for parties and candidates to mobilize voters everywhere, thereby increasing turnout. Disproportionality in the translation of votes into legislative seats provides a disincentive to voting, which lowers turnout. Multipartyism assigns elections a less decisive role in government formation, depressing turnout. By generating more decisive governments, unicameralism provides a clearer link between elections and legislation, increasing turnout. Finally, mandatory voting laws produce a disincentive to not vote. Empirical analyses of average voter-turnout levels in the 1970s and 1960s across 19 democracies are consistent with these expectations, although Switzerland and the United States appear to be outliers. The results have major implications for the way we interpret national differences in voter-turnout rates.

Political participation can assume a variety of forms including protesting, voting, and engaging more actively in campaign activities (Huntington and Nelson 1976; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). In the industrial democracies, however, more people vote than engage in any other type of routinized mass political behavior.

At the same time, there is considerable variation across the democracies in voter-turnout rates. For example, average voter turnout in the 1970s was 44% in Switzerland, 54% in the United States, 72% in Japan, 82% in Norway, and 94% in Italy (Powell 1986, 38). How can these differences be explained?

One common answer is that even though all of these countries are democratic, they differ in political culture. That is, they differ in terms of their citizens' "subjective orientation to politics" (Verba 1965, 513. See also Pye 1972). Some countries are said to have more participatory cultures than others (see, e.g., Almond and Verba 1963). Where cultures are more participatory, citizens display heightened enthusiasm for politics: they exhibit greater political satisfaction with and pride in their institutions and are generally more efficacious in the role they and their fellow citizens play in politics. According to this line of thought, cultures that foster such participatory values enhance voting turnout.

Some go even further to take high voter-turnout rates as prima facie evidence of participatory norms (see, e.g.,

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Putnam et al. 1983, 63-65). But if norms are defined in terms of a behavioral outcome, then those norms cannot logically be used to account for that outcome. Thus, the equation of participatory norms with turnout does not contribute to an explication of national differences in turnout.

However, the cultural explanation of turnout does draw attention to the fact that the way we account for turnout bears on the meaning we place on voting itself. For example, much popular discussion of the comparatively low turnout in U.S. elections in recent years has been cast in terms of values: low rates of participation are seen to reflect apathy or alienation, and it is commonly believed that higher turnout rates would indicate a broader public satisfaction with political life. At the same time, there is a venerable literature claiming that low participation may testify to satisfaction, and that high turnout is undesirable. What is distinctive about such explanations, of course, is their stress on values.

An alternative to the cultural explanation of voting turnout centers on institutional factors. This alternative has found particular favor among students of U.S. politics, reflecting in part the distinctiveness of U.S. electoral law (for an interesting early statement, see Gosnell 1930). Thus, Rusk (1970) documented the electoral effects of the introduction of the Australian ballot in the United States. And until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its amendments (especially that of 1970), procedures like poll taxes, literacy tests, and lengthy residency requirements inhibited voter turnout considerably. Even with the reforms that came with the voting rights legislation, electoral laws in the United States (such as the common 30-day residency requirement) continue to serve as a strong damper on voter turnout (Wolfinger, Glass, and Squire 1985; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Below the federal level, turnout in gubernatorial elections has been found to be substantially influenced by such factors as electoral law and the nature of political competition (Patterson and Caldeira 1983). Most recently, Powell (1986) has shown that while U.S. citizens seem to be highly positively disposed toward participation, voter turnout is much lower in the United States than in most other democracies, which he attributes to the U.S. legal and institutional environment.

That voter turnout should respond to institutional patterns makes good intuitive sense. Voting is everywhere systematically governed by laws and institutional arrangements that vary markedly from nation to nation. In contrast, the right to discuss politics and contact officials is recognized in all democracies in a uniform manner, and the right to protest is tolerated in most. Because it is an institutionalized form of political behavior, then, the volume of voter turnout would seem potentially more responsive than other varieties of mass political behavior to laws and procedures. If this is the case, then national contrasts in turnout reflect national variations in the institutionally induced incentive structures that confront voters, as opposed to differences in culture.

My purpose is to demonstrate that different institutional arrangements have a major and predictable impact on national rates of voter turnout. Part of the argument has already been offered by Powell (1986), and this paper builds on his work. Powell's principal purpose was to evaluate turnout in the United States by comparing it with the other industrial democracies. Even with the United States and Switzerland (the other deviant case) excluded, however, there remain considerable differences in rates of turnout, from 68% in Canada to 94% in Italy during the 1970s. My goal is to account for these differences.

The Issues

It is scarcely novel to observe that political institutions shape the distribution of incentives for political actors, whether they are candidates for office or simply citizens contemplating whether to vote. My working assumptions are as follows: When there are incentives for candidates and parties to mobilize more voters, they will do so, and this will increase turnout. At the same time, I assume that institutional arrangements influence the degree to which potential voters think their vote will make a difference both to the election outcome itself and to the subsequent formation of a government. Five specific institutional factors seem particularly germane to turnout.

Nationally Competitive Districts

For leaders, the relevant issue is the structure of political competition. Powell (1986) addressed this question in two ways. First, he examined the closeness of elections, on the grounds that close elections may give citizens more reason to vote and give parties more reason to mobilize voters. Second, he looked at the extent to which electoral districts are nationally competitive. He reasoned that

> where the chief executive is chosen by simple majority or plurality vote, all regions should be equally important (e.g., France). In countries where the chief executive is chosen by the legislature, as in the various parliamentary systems, the question becomes the nature of the constituencies electing the legislators. With proportional representation from the nation as a whole or from large districts, parties have an incentive to mobilize everywhere. With single-member districts, some areas may be written off as hopeless. (1986, 21)

The argument ties in nicely with Gosnell's (1930) analysis of turnout in Europe. Gosnell's data from the 1924 British parliamentary election showed that turnout was much higher in those constituencies where the margin of victory was close. From this pattern, he concluded that "the character of the British system of representation does not favor a high participation in every election district. In those constituencies in which one party is sure of victory, many electors regard voting as useless. . . . The single-member-district system of representation discourages voting in one-party districts" (1930, 14).

Powell's empirical results indicate that the closeness of elections has no bearing on turnout but that nationally competitive districts produce higher rates of turnout than do single-member districts. That electoral closeness has little effect may reflect an ambiguity in this variable as a measure of competition—it is not clear that frequent party turnover needs to occur before voting systems can be said to be competitive. Instead, the *potential* for turnover may be more critical to the degree of competitiveness. The latter, however, is difficult to define and measure unambiguously.

In contrast, Powell found that nationally competitive districts do appear important to turnout. This result is consistent with Gosnell's argument that the presence of such districts provides incentives for parties and candidates to mobilize voters, which increases turnout.

Electoral Disproportionality

In large modern democracies, it is unlikely that any one vote will be decisive in shaping the overall outcome (see, e.g., Riker and Ordeshook 1973 for a discussion of the implications of this fact). Nonetheless, some electoral systems raise the potential decisiveness of the marginal vote. The degree of proportionality in the translation of votes into seats in the lower legislative house is important in this regard. Most electoral systems produce a degree of disproportionality in favor of the largest parties, but some systems generate a good deal more than others

(Rae 1971a). Highly disproportional systems require minor parties to accumulate many more votes to achieve a given degree of legislative representation, which lowers the benefits of voting for the supporters of those parties. The greater the disproportionality, then, the more likely are the votes of minor-party supporters to be wasted.

Disproportionality thus introduces a strong disincentive to potential minor-party voters' casting a ballot. At the same time, electoral disproportionality influences the strategies of parties and their candidates. Most notably, one would expect the campaign appeals of minor parties to reflect their chances of achieving a measure of legislative representation. Disproportionality in the translation of votes into legislative seats should therefore lower voter turnout.

Multipartyism

In contrast, institutional arrangements that allow elections a more decisive role in government formation and that allow for more decisive governments should increase voter turnout. Two such institutional factors are relevant to our purposes: first is the number of political parties and second is unicameralism. As Downs has argued, voters in multiparty systems that produce coalitions face a fundamental problem: they do not directly select the government that will govern them. Instead, they vote for parties that select a government in the legislature, so that "ambiguity and compromise are introduced on a secondary level whenever coalitions are formed" (Downs 1957, 155). This introduces a paradox for multiparty systems: "The type of political system which seems to offer the voter a more definite choice among policies in fact offers him a less definite one. This system may even make it impossible for him to choose a government at all. Instead, it may force him to shift this responsibility onto a legislature over which he has very little control between elections" (p. 156). Downs's argument implies that elections play a less decisive role in government formation within multiparty systems. Where elections are less important, citizens have less incentive to vote. Multipartyism should therefore depress turnout.[1]

Unicameralism

Beyond the issue of the decisiveness of elections in government formation is the question of the decisiveness of the governments that ensue.[2] Here, I suggest that the degree to which the first legislative body is constrained or checked by other institutions is the relevant quantity. That is, unicameralism is important in producing decisive governments. Where there is no second house (as in New Zealand), governments based on the first house do not have to compete and compromise with another legislative chamber. In contrast, where there is strong bicameralism (as in West Germany and Switzerland), legislation can only be produced by compromise between members of the two houses. This means that elections for the lower house play a less decisive role in the production of legislation where bicameralism is strong. Unicameralism should therefore foster turnout.

The four factors I have introduced are somewhat interrelated. For example, single-member districts favor two-party systems (Duverger 1963), and proportional representation and electoral proportionality are related to each other (Rae 1971a). Indeed, one might argue that the four factors I have discussed simply summarize the distinction between majoritarian and consensual forms of democracy (Lijphart 1984). While there is an element of truth in this argument, it is easily overstated. The interrelations are not strong. Instead, most democracies include mixtures of these characteristics, and

there are few pure types (see, e.g., the essays in Bogdanor and Butler 1983). The existence of unicameralism and proportional representation in Israel is a good case in point. The broader issue is that no institutional arrangements are neutral. All involve, in one form or another, a "mobilization of bias" to use Schattschneider's (1960) felicitous term. The task, then, is to evaluate how these biases impinge upon voter turnout.

Compulsory Voting Laws

Finally, a small number of democracies (Australia, Belgium, and Italy) have laws that mandate voting, as did the Netherlands until 1970. One would expect such "compulsory" voting laws to increase turnout (Gosnell 1930, 184–85; Tingsten 1937). At the same time, the quotation marks are deliberate. The average turnout from 1971 to 1980 in Australia, for example, was 84% (Powell 1986). While this is a high figure, it also indicates that a substantial number of Australian citizens did not vote. I am unaware of any reports either that Australian authorities have shown an inclination or possess the resources to prosecute actively all nonvoters. Similarly, while voting is compulsory in Italy, "the only penalty incurred by an offender is to have his name posted outside the town hall in his commune of residence, and to have his 'certificate of good conduct,' now fallen largely into disuse, stamped 'Did not vote' for five years" (Seton-Watson 1983, 111). Thus, while the presence of mandatory voting laws does provide a disincentive to nonvoting that should increase turnout, there is no reason to anticipate that such laws generate total compliance.

Data Analysis

My empirical analysis centers on voter turnout in the industrial democracies in the 1970s, and I replicate the results with comparable data for the 1960s. To be considered an industrial democracy, the country had to be continuously democratic since about 1950. This results in a list of 19 states, including the Western European democracies, Israel, Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan (see Table A-1). My list of countries is the same as Powell's (1986, 38), except that I exclude Spain in view of the fact that Franco did not die until late 1975, and the subsequent transition to democracy was neither smooth nor immediate.

Of the 19 democracies in Table A-1, two stand out as atypical in terms of voter turnout: Switzerland and the United States. In Switzerland, women were not granted the right to vote in national elections until 1971, which means that they were excluded from citizenship until that date. Additionally, the Swiss collective national executive, in effect since 1943, is a unique organizational form that minimizes competition at the federal level. Also, the federal government is not the major provider of collective goods because the cantons are the more important locus of policy-making activity (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972; Steiner 1974). As a result, in Swiss federal elections "there is little incentive for voters to go to the polls, or for the major parties to mobilize them" (Powell 1982, 119). In sum, a series of extraordinary patterns converge in Swiss national politics to minimize voter turnout.[3]

Similarly, electoral law in the United States retains a number of provisions that depress voter turnout. This is the case despite the reforms associated with the Voting Rights Act and its amendments (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), and despite the fact that the U.S. federal government remains a major provider of public goods and a major policy-making arena. The most notable electoral law that is unique to the United States and that has

depressed turnout is the widespread 30-day residency requirement for voter registration.[4] The idiosyncratic features of Swiss and U.S. politics are addressed in my analysis below.

Measures

The dependent variable is the *average voter turnout*, expressed as a percentage of the eligible population. Data were collected for two periods: 1971-80 and 1960-70. Two points need to be made here. First, the eligible population is not restricted to those registered to vote but includes all population members of voting age. Second, with two exceptions, the turnout figures refer to elections for the first (or lower) legislative house. The figures for France and the United States reflect average turnout in presidential elections. Total turnout figures are taken from Mackie and Rose 1982. The eligible voting population was calculated for each country from data reported by the International Labour Office (1977) and by the United Nations (1984). Country values by decade are listed in the Appendix, along with further details on the calculation of voting rates.

To gauge the degree to which there are *nationally competitive districts*, I rely on Powell's figures. Countries with national elections by proportional representation or a national pool for some legislative districts or a simple national presidential vote are assigned a score of four; those with proportional representation in large districts receive a score of three; countries with proportional representation and three to five members per district are scored two; and countries with single-member or winner-take-all districts receive the lowest score of one. Values for this variable on all countries are listed by Powell (1986, 38).

Electoral disproportionality is measured using Lijphart's (1984, 160-65) index of disproportionality. This index takes the average vote-seat share deviation of the two largest parties in the years from 1945 to 1980. According to Lijphart's figures, the most proportional system in the period was Denmark, with a score of 0.9. The least proportional was France (Fifth Republic), with a score of 12.3. Country values are listed in Lijphart 1984 (Tbl. 9.1).

Multipartyism is gauged with a measure developed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979) of the effective number of political parties in the legislature. This measure constitutes a rearrangement of Rae and Taylor's (1970) index of fractionalization: the higher the score, the greater the distance from a pure two-party system. Data for the 19 countries are from Lijphart (1984, Tbl. 7.3) and again refer to the 1945-80 period.[5] Scores range from 1.9 (United States) to 5.0 (Finland and Switzerland).

Unicameralism is measured using the criteria proposed by Lijphart (1984, 212-13), who suggests that two features are of particular importance. First, whether bicameralism is asymmetrical in a manner that favors the lower house or symmetrical (as in Belgium and Italy). The more symmetrical, the stronger the bicameralism. Second, whether bicameralism is "congruent" in the sense of both houses' being very similar in composition, or do the two houses reflect very different sets of interests? The more congruent, the weaker the bicameralism. Employing these criteria, Lijphart assigns the highest score of four for unicameral countries; three for congruent and very asymmetrical bicameralism; two for incongruent and very asymmetrical bicameralism; one for bicameralism; and zero for strong bicameralism. Country scores are made on the basis of Lijphart's empirical classifications in his Tables 6.3 and 6.4, except that Sweden is scored four after 1970 and two before that year because it has been unicameral since 1970 but was bicameral before that (see Lijphart 1984, 213, for the scoring system).

Table 1. Summary Statistics for all Variables

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Voter turnout, 1970s	43.3	93.5	78.36	12.23
Voter turnout, 1960s	25.1	93.4	77.55	15.09
Nationally competitive districts	1.0	4.0	2.68	1.20
Electoral disproportionality	.9	12.3	3.67	3.01
Multipartyism	1.9	5.0	3.28	1.06
Unicameralism, 1970s	0	4.0	2.11	1.59
Unicameralism, 1960s	0	4.0	2.00	1.53
Compulsory voting, 1970s	0	1.0	.16	.37
Compulsory voting, 1960s	0	1.0	.21	.42
Number of cases				19

Finally, *compulsory voting* laws are represented by a dummy variable that equals one where such laws are present and zero otherwise. Following Powell (1986, 38), three countries receive a score of one on this variable for the years after 1970: Australia, Belgium, and Italy. For the decade of the 1960s, Holland is also scored one (compulsory voting was abolished in the Netherlands in 1970).

In Table 1, I report the summary statistics for all variables. For the 1970s, turnout ranges from 43% (Switzerland) to 93% (Italy), with a mean of 78.4% and a standard deviation of 12.2. Switzerland and the United States have extreme (low) turnout values.[6] With these two cases removed, the minimum turnout score is 67% (Canada), the mean increases slightly to 81.8%, while the standard deviation is almost halved (to 6.5). In other words, Switzerland and the United States are responsible for a good portion of the observed variance in turnout across the 19 democracies. At the same time, the removal of these two cases has no discernible impact on the summary statistics among the explanatory variables in Table 1. This suggests that the distinctively low turnout rates of Switzerland and the United States are not due to the institutional factors listed in Table 1, since those two countries do not exhibit unusual values for these characteristics. Instead, the low turnout would appear to be a function of other institutional patterns that are unique to these two cases.[7]

With one exception, the remaining summary statistics for the explanatory variables in Table 1 are not particularly sensitive to any unusual country values. The exception is the French score of 12.3 on electoral disproportionality (the next highest score is 8.1 for Canada). Removal of the French score reduces the mean score on this variable from 3.7 to 3.2, and the standard deviation drops from 3.0 to 2.2. I shall return to this issue below.

Parameter Estimates

Table 2 displays two sets of estimates of the effects of institutional procedures on voter turnout in the 1970s. In the first column, turnout is regressed on the five explanatory variables listed in Table 1. Inspection of the coefficient estimates indicates that each has the expected sign, although the size of many of the coefficients seems excessive. For example, it is hard to believe that mandatory voting laws raise turnout by 22 percentage points on the average. With the exception of electoral disproportionality, all parameter estimates have t-ratios larger than 2.0, which means that they are statistically significant beyond the .05 level (using two-tailed tests). Overall, the model ac-

Table 2. Regressions of Voter Turnout on Institutional Characteristics for the Industrial Democracies, 1971–80

Regressor	Coefficients (t-ratios)	
	Equation Without Swiss and U.S. Dummies	Equation Including Swiss and U.S. Dummies
Nationally competitive districts	6.09 (3.1)	3.56 (3.7)
Electoral disproportionality	- .41 (0.6)	- .79 (2.5)
Multipartyism	-6.18 (2.7)	- 2.99 (2.5)
Unicameralism	4.69 (3.9)	1.69 (2.4)
Compulsory voting	22.18 (4.4)	13.09 (4.9)
Switzerland dummy		-29.62 (6.4)
United States dummy		-17.62 (4.3)
Constant	70.44 (8.2)	78.37 (17.7)
R^2	74.8	.96
F-ratio	7.72	33.21
Number of cases		19

counts for three-quarters of the variance and has a secure F-ratio.

However, the estimates in the first column of Table 2 are naive in the sense that they take no cognizance of the particularly low turnout rates of Switzerland and the United States. Accordingly, the second column of the table shows estimates of the basic model modified to include a dummy variable for each of these two cases. Comparing the two columns, we see that the addition of these two country-dummy variables has a pronounced impact on each of the coefficient estimates. Four of those estimates are reduced by between 36% and 59% of their original values to more reasonable levels, while the estimate for electoral disproportionality increases by 92%. Additionally, all estimates have the anticipated sign, and each has an acceptable t-ratio. Both country dummies are sharply negative with highly significant t-ratios, and the revised model accounts for 95% of the variance in national rates of turnout.

Comparing the two sets of estimates is instructive. First, it is clear that those in the first column are not robust and that Switzerland and the United States are influential cases. This is evident from the shifting coefficient estimates just discussed. It is also apparent from the t-ratios of 6.4 and 4.3 for the country dummies, which are equal to the studentized residuals (a measure of influence) for those two cases (Bollen and Jackman 1985, 517). Thus, the estimates in the first column of Table 2 do not reflect general patterns.

Second, it is important to understand

that the revised estimates in the second column mean that Switzerland and the United States have been removed from the analysis. Each takes up a complete degree of freedom. Thus, for both cases, the "fitted" turnout values are identical to the actual turnout rates (see Table A-1). Indeed, the same estimates and t-ratios for the five explanatory variables are obtained with these two cases excluded (N = 17).[8] This implies that the estimated effects of the five explanatory variables apply to all of the democracies except for Switzerland and the United States. Consequently, we can draw no conclusions from the estimated model about the effects of, say, unicameralism or multipartyism for these two cases. Given the evidence at hand, explanations of turnout in Switzerland and the United States couched in terms of the unique institutional configurations in each of those countries must remain qualitative.

Stability of the Estimates

How stable are the estimates in the second column of Table 2? To address this question, I first checked for possible collinearity. In the last section I suggested that the relations among the explanatory variables are not high. The largest zero-order associations (N = 19) are between multipartyism and nationally competitive districts (r = .65), and between multipartyism and electoral disproportionality (r = −.48); with the scores for Switzerland and the United States removed, these correlations are .66 and −.52, respectively. A more rigorous test involves regressing, in turn, each explanatory variable on the remaining explanatory variables. Results of this procedure suggest a pattern similar to that indicated in the zero-order correlations. Thus, the explanatory variables are systematically associated with each other in the ways that students of electoral systems would expect. However, given the size of these associations and given that the principal effect of collinearity is to inflate standard errors, collinearity is not a major problem in the present context.

Along with these checks, I examined the estimates for robustness to evaluate the extent to which any countries might be exerting a disproportionate effect on the estimated parameters. Here, I relied primarily on partial regression plots (see Belsley, Kuh, and Welsch 1980; Bollen and Jackman 1985; and Velleman and Welsch 1981). These plots revealed one potential problem: the partial plot for electoral disproportionality flagged France as possibly problematic largely because the French score on this variable is relatively high. I checked whether France was an influential case in two ways. First, to pull in the high values, I performed a simple rank-order transformation on electoral disproportionality and reestimated the model in Table 2, column 2, substituting the transformed variable for the original. The resulting estimates are very similar to those reported in Table 2 and lead to exactly the same conclusion. Second, I added a country-dummy variable for France to the model in Table 2, column 2. The estimate for this country dummy has a t-ratio of only 0.4.

That France is not an influential case is of particular interest for two reasons. First, this is the only country in the analysis that experienced profound constitutional changes after 1950.[9] Second, France and the United States are the only two countries in the analysis that have an unambiguously presidential form of government (Lijphart 1984, 70-71), and I have therefore—like Powell—calculated turnout scores for France from presidential, rather than legislative, elections. The United States' scores have already been removed from the analysis. Generalizing from only two cases can most charitably be regarded as hazardous. However, because France does not appear to be an

influential case, it seems reasonable to conclude that presidential forms of government are not distinctive in terms of electoral turnout. More generally, the diagnostic tests indicate that the results are relatively robust.

As a third test for stability, I examined the partial regression plots for evidence of heteroscedasticity. I also calculated the rank-order correlations between the absolute value of the residuals (ABSRES) from the estimates in Table 2, column 2 and each of the explanatory variables (see Johnston 1972) and regressed ABSRES on all of the explanatory variables. None of these tests provided systematic evidence of heteroscedasticity. I conclude from all of these procedures that the second set of estimates in Table 2 is not seriously affected by collinearity, the presence of influential cases, or heteroscedasticity, and, in this sense, that those estimates are reasonably stable.

Other Considerations

A brief comparison of my specification with Powell's (1986, Tbl. 2) is in order because he includes three factors that I have not. First, Powell considers the percentage of the population over 34 years of age as an explanatory variable because survey evidence indicates that young citizens have lower rates of turnout. His own results, however, indicate that this variable has no systematic effect (Powell reports a coefficient of .38 and a standard error of .28, which implies a t-ratio of 1.36). Second, Powell controls for the presence of automatic registration laws. But only the United States and France have voluntary registration, and even these two cases are quite distinct from each other, as I have already indicated. I conclude that the critical distinction is between the voluntary registration of the United States (accompanied, as it is, by no other requirements that citizens register) and all other voter registration systems. This distinction is captured already by the country dummy for the United States. Third, Powell includes a measure of the linkage between social groups and political parties. This variable is like a measure of class voting (see Alford 1964), except that it can reflect occupation *or* religion *or* church attendance. Whichever of these shows the highest group-party linkage in a given country is taken as the score for that country. However, this variable is a little difficult to interpret because the measure of group-party linkages refers to different groups in each country and because it does not include all potentially relevant groups (for example, religious voting is counted but language-based voting is not). Nor have I found any clear statistical evidence to warrant its inclusion.[10]

The task that remains is to evaluate the coefficient estimates in the second column of Table 2. I have already noted that all coefficients are of the expected sign. Now we need to evaluate their magnitude. The estimate for type of electoral district is 3.6. Because this variable ranges from 1 to 4, the estimated coefficient indicates a net spread of over 14 percentage points in turnout between countries with single-member districts (like New Zealand and the United Kingdom) and those with national "districts" (such as Israel and the Netherlands). Similar calculations for the remaining explanatory variables indicate the following. Those countries where the vote-seat translation is proportional (e.g., Denmark and Sweden) have a turnout advantage of about 9 points over France, where the vote-seat translation is most disproportional. On the other hand, two-party systems (e.g., New Zealand and the United Kingdom) enjoy a turnout advantage of 12 points over multiparty systems (e.g., Finland and the Netherlands). The smallest net effect is for unicameralism: the presence of unicameral legislatures in countries like Finland and Norway produces a turnout increase of about 8 points

over the rate that prevails with strong bicameralism (as in Australia and West Germany). Finally, with all these factors controlled, mandatory voting laws increase turnout by 13 points in the three countries where they apply.

I emphasize that the preceding are net effects. Further, because few countries have a purely majoritarian set of institutional arrangements, these effects offset each other in some cases. For example, the turnout-enhancing impact of nationally competitive elections in the Netherlands is offset by the existence of multipartyism in that country. The turnout-inhibiting effect of multipartyism is similarly compensated by unicameralism in the case of Finland. On the other hand, the relatively low turnout in Canada reflects a set of institutional arrangements (single-member districts, electoral disproportionality, and weak bicameralism) that dampen participation in a more cumulative manner. And the higher turnout in Austria is due to a set of procedures (competitive elections, more electoral proportionality, and only nominal bicameralism) that facilitate voting in an equally cumulative way.

In light of these calculations, which reflect the observed ranges of all the variables in the industrial democracies, the effects of nationally competitive districts and of mandatory voting laws appear to be the strongest. But differences in the magnitudes of the coefficients are not large, and the effects of the remaining three institutional factors remain pronounced.

Replication

The evidence adduced to this point indicates that political institutions have a major impact on rates of voter turnout. Yet it remains the case that the model is based on a comparatively small number of cases and that it applies only to elections that took place in the 1970s. Are the results unique to that decade?

To address this question, I gathered data on voter turnout in the previous decade (1960-1970) for the same 19 democracies. Sources and estimation procedures for the turnout data are the same as before and are listed in the Appendix, along with country values. Comparing average turnout rates for 1960-70 with those for 1971-80 indicates that country-turnout levels were relatively stable across both decades (for similar observations, see Crewe 1981; Powell 1980). But some systematic shifts are also evident. For example, turnout dropped eight percentage points in the Netherlands in the 1970s, while it rose by a smaller amount in Sweden in the same period.

The explanatory variables, of course, refer to long-term constitutional arrangements that have varied little since 1950. Indeed, the major constitutional transformation since that date came with the formation of the Fifth French Republic in 1958. In view of this, the explanatory variables for the analysis of turnout in the 1960s are identical to those employed for the 1970s analysis, with two exceptions. First, the Swedish reform of 1970 abolished the upper legislative house so that the Riksdag has been unicameral since that date. Second, mandatory voting was abolished in the Netherlands in the same year. As indicated earlier, the appropriate variables are modified for the 1960s analysis to reflect these facts.

In Table 3, I report the estimated effects of political institutions on average voter turnout, 1960-70. Because it includes the country dummy variables for Switzerland and the United States, this set of estimates can be compared directly to the figures in the second column of Table 2. The major difference between the two decades occurs with the country-dummy variables. For the 1960s, the adjustment for Switzerland is $-.43$, which is much larger than the corresponding adjustment for the 1970s and reflects the disenfranchisement of Swiss women before 1971. In contrast, the

Table 3. Regressions of Voter Turnout on Institutional Characteristics for the Industrial Democracies, 1960–70

Regressor	Coefficients (t-ratios)
Nationally competitive districts	3.13 (2.8)
Electoral disproportionality	- 1.10 (3.2)
Multipartyism	- 4.06 (2.7)
Unicameralism	2.69 (2.9)
Compulsory voting	15.03 (4.8)
Switzerland dummy	-43.03 (7.3)
United States dummy	- 8.18 (1.8)
Constant	80.66 (17.8)
R^2	.97
F-ratio	43.69
Number of cases	19

adjustment for the United States is −8 for the 1960s, which is considerably *smaller* than the 1970s adjustment of −18. As is well known, voter turnout declined considerably in the United States from 1960 to 1980 (for an analysis of this decline, see Abramson and Aldrich 1982).[11]

All of the remaining coefficient estimates have the same sign, are statistically significant, and are of similar magnitude across the two decades. As a result, the 1960s analysis simply reinforces the inferences drawn first for the 1970s. At one level, this reflects the fact that constitutional arrangements have largely been in place throughout the period. But the replication also indicates that when political institutions are altered, voter turnout is affected. Turnout fell after the abolition of mandatory voting in the Netherlands, and the introduction of unicameralism in Sweden was followed by an increase in voter turnout.

Implications

The preceding analyses indicate that national political institutions and electoral laws provide an important incentive structure for voter turnout. The model I have presented accounts rather well for variations in turnout across 17 of the 19 democracies. And the distinctive turnout rates of the two remaining countries are most plausibly linked to their unique political institutions and laws.[12] What are the general implications of this conclusion?

First, in conjunction with Powell's (1986) analysis, my results challenge the idea that national differences in voter

turnout reflect national differences of political culture. Powell's cross-national survey analyses suggest that U.S. citizens have the edge in participatory attitude structures (see also Almond and Verba 1963; Wolfinger, Glass, and Squire 1985). However, differences in participatory norms are not, in turn, systematically linked to turnout rates. For example, as Crewe noted six years ago,

> The best known (and still most useful) comparative study of [subjective] orientations, *The Civic Culture*, found that interest in politics, attention to political affairs in the media, feelings of civic duty and of individual political efficacy, and trust in political as opposed to other solutions to individual and communal problems, were consistently highest in the United States, followed by Britain, then Germany, and finally Italy—exactly the *reverse* of their rank order for postwar turnout! (1981, 239; italics added)

In short, even with the United States excluded, national differences in norms are unrelated to variations in turnout. More recent cross-national survey data are no kinder to a political-culture explanation (Powell 1986; Wolfinger, Glass, and Squire 1985). Coupled with my analyses, these data undermine the plausibility of any culture-turnout linkage.[13]

Consider the cases of Australia and New Zealand, two countries with similar political histories and cultures. This shared background is reflected in many institutional arrangements, including single-member districts, electoral disproportionality, and a near two-party system. Moreover, turnout has persistently been only slightly higher in Australia (84.5% versus 83.5% in the 1970s, and 84% versus 82% in the 1960s). Some might conclude that this similarity in turnout rates reflects shared cultural patterns. It is more fruitful, however, to note that along with all of their shared characteristics, there are two major institutional differences, the effects of which almost offset each other. Australia has mandatory voting and strong bicameralism, while voting is not compulsory in New Zealand, which has been unicameral since the abolition of the Legislative Council in 1950. Given these two differences and my estimates, we would expect marginally higher turnout in Australia because both mandatory voting and unicameralism increase turnout, but the former effect is more pronounced.

In contrast, Canada, the other old British dominion, shares many cultural features with both of these countries, along with single-member districts and a similar party system. However, the Canadian turnout figure is only 67%. Unlike Australia, Canada lacks mandatory voting laws, and unlike New Zealand, it lacks strong unicameralism. Both of these factors, along with an even less proportional electoral system, hold Canadian turnout well below the observed rates in Australia and New Zealand.

One other example is useful. Norway and Sweden have many historical, cultural, and institutional commonalities. For example, they have similar forms of electoral representation, the same effective number of political parties, and both are unicameral. However, Lijphart's figures indicate a higher degree of disproportionality in the translation of votes into legislative seats in Norway than in Sweden. According to my model, this accounts for the lower average rate of turnout in Norway (81% versus 87% in Sweden in the 1970s). Note, too, that the abolition of the Swedish upper house in 1970 resulted in an increase in average voter turnout of four percentage points in the subsequent decade.

It is difficult to see how differences like these can be explained by varying political cultures.[14] Along with the analyses by Powell (1980, 1986) and Wolfinger, Glass, and Squire (1985), my results suggest that it is much more profitable to account for such differences in terms of the kinds of incentives to voting generated by varying national political institutions and laws.[15] I emphasize again, however, that the

critical distinction is not between majoritarian and consensual constitutional arrangements. Instead, the evidence indicates that both types of arrangements have some features that increase the incentive to vote and other features that inhibit that incentive. It appears that the overall constitutional arrangement is less important than its specific components in influencing voter turnout.

Second, my results have implications for the way in which we interpret national differences in rates of voter turnout in the industrial democracies. Some studies have included voter turnout as one component of a measure of political democracy (e.g., Jackman 1973). Others have questioned this practice on the grounds that the meaning of national variations in turnout is ambiguous (e.g., Bollen 1980). Specifically, it has been suggested that variations in voter turnout may reflect apathy or alienation and that there is no clear way to choose between the two (e.g., Lipset 1960).

Some go much further to suggest that low turnout reflects satisfaction with the political status quo and is therefore a good thing. For example, just over 50 years ago Wilson wrote, "In a society in which only 50 percent of the electorate participates it is clear that politics does satisfy in a way the desire of the mass of the individuals in the state. As the percentage of participation rises above, let us say, ninety percent, it is apparent that the tensions of political struggle are stretching to the breaking point the will toward the constitutional" (1935, 76. See also Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, chap. 11; Wilson, 1930). To be fair, Wilson was trying to explain events in Europe in the 1930s. But it is interesting to note that, when applied to 1970s turnout figures, his argument suggests that Swiss and U.S. citizens should be distinctively satisfied, while Italy and Sweden should be on the verge of collapse. It is of equal interest that at least one of Wilson's contemporaries concluded that electoral turnout in Europe was best explained by the structure of political competition and electoral laws (Gosnell 1930).

Extending Wilson's argument a little, Morris-Jones asserted that the notion that high turnout is desirable belongs properly to "the totalitarian camp" (1954, 25). Indeed, apathy is the handmaiden of democracy:[16]

> The presence of an apathetic part of the electorate . . . may also have a beneficial effect on the tone of political life itself. For this group is a more or less vivid reminder of the proper limitations of politics, a more or less effective counterforce to the fanatics who constitute the real danger to liberal democracy. A State which has cured apathy is likely to be a State in which too many people have fallen into the error of believing in the efficiency of political solutions for the problems of ordinary lives. (1954, 37)

After examining popular support for democratic principles, Prothro and Grigg concluded that apathy may be "functional" for democracy: "fortunately for the democratic system, those with the most undemocratic principles are also those who are least likely to act" (1960, 294). Lipset's analysis of working-class authoritarianism (1960, chap. 4) also implies that high turnout may often be undesirable because it involves political participation by those with antidemocratic tendencies.

Coming from a slightly different tack, Eckstein argued for the importance of "balanced disparities" in preserving stable democracies: "Democratic governments require a healthy degree of authoritarianism not only for the sake of congruence between government and other aspects of society, but for the even simpler reason that a representative government must govern as well as represent—must satisfy two values which, on the evidence, are not easily reconcilable" (1966, 265-66). According to this line of thought, high levels of participation may not be desirable because participation conflicts with other valued processes. Thus, citizen

involvement is a phenomenon that is perhaps best enjoyed in moderation. Almond and Verba state the case well:

> The most striking characteristic of the civic culture . . . is its mixed quality. It is a mixture in the first place of parochial, subject, and citizen orientations. The orientation of the parochial to primary relationships, the passive political orientation of the subject, the activity of the citizen, all merge within the civic culture. The result is a set of political orientations that are managed or balanced. There is political activity, but not so much as to destroy governmental authority; there is involvement and commitment, but they are moderated; there is political cleavage, but it is held in check (1963, 492-93).

More recently, Huntington has argued that postindustrial societies may, in fact, face a problem of overparticipation: "Widespread education tends to produce *too much interest and participation* which leads in turn to political stalemate. Innovation is easier when substantial portions of the population are indifferent" (1974, 177; italics added). In other words, when participation levels become excessive, a crisis of governability may be induced.

The results of my paper suggest that the significance of national differences in rates of voter turnout is less ambiguous than some have suggested, and, further, that high rates of voter participation are not pernicious. Specifically, the odds that citizens will vote vary with the structural incentives that they confront. Moreover, if cross-national variations in turnout are primarily driven by differing institutional arrangements, then high rates of voter turnout cannot be taken in themselves as evidence of subjective participatory norms (as is done, e.g., in Putnam et al. 1983).

That voting turnout is low when laws prevent or actively discourage large groups of people from voting is a truism—contemporary South Africa, Switzerland until 1971, or the U.S. southern politics of yesteryear (Key 1949) are the blatant cases in the post-World War II world. My analysis indicates that even when we place such extreme cases to one side, legal and institutional variations retain a critical role. Where institutions provide citizens with incentives to vote, more people actually participate; where institutions generate disincentives to vote, turnout suffers. Thus, the meaning of national differences in voter turnout is rather clear: turnout figures offer one gauge of participatory political democracy.

Appendix

In Table A-1, I report voter turnout for the 19 industrial democracies.

Figures in the first and third columns are average turnout levels for 1971-80 and 1960-70, respectively, and entries in parentheses indicate the number of elections on which the averages are based. Turnout levels reflect total turnout divided by the size of the population of voting age. Figures in the second and fourth columns are the fitted turnout levels for the two decades and are based on the estimates in Table 2, column 2 and Table 3, respectively.

Total turnout figures are from Mackie and Rose 1982 and, with two exceptions, are for national elections to the lower legislative house. For France and the United States, total turnout figures are for presidential elections. In each decade, France is counted as having four elections because I have averaged turnout from first- and second-round presidential elections. In addition, because there was only one election from 1971 to 1980 (in 1974), I have included turnout from the 1981 election for France only.

Estimates of the size of the population of voting age are based on figures published by the International Labour Office (1977) for 1960 and 1970, and by the United Nations (1984) for the early 1980s. Since 1960, and especially in the 1970s, most countries lowered the voting age at least once, and often more. The size of the population of voting age reflects these

Table A-1. Countries and Turnout Values for the 1960s and 1970s

Country	Turnout 1971–80	Fitted Turnout 1971–80	Turnout 1960–70	Fitted Turnout 1960–70
Australia	84.48(5)	83.13	83.91(4)	82.51
Austria	87.76(3)	85.97	90.10(3)	87.00
Belgium	87.83(4)	91.03	86.87(3)	90.34
Canada	67.15(4)	71.76	70.75(4)	70.51
Denmark	86.77(5)	85.81	86.53(4)	85.51
Finland	82.18(4)	79.60	84.12(3)	78.77
France	76.84(4)	76.45	70.80(4)	71.62
West Germany	84.22(3)	83.19	82.74(3)	80.32
Ireland	76.56(2)	80.30	73.65(3)	80.99
Israel	82.15(2)	84.45	81.79(3)	83.67
Italy	93.47(3)	91.63	93.42(2)	91.15
Japan	72.91(4)	74.60	70.02(4)	72.40
Netherlands	81.54(3)	78.78	89.60(2)	89.81
New Zealand	83.61(3)	77.75	81.82(4)	79.50
Norway	81.32(2)	83.80	81.65(3)	84.42
Sweden	87.46(3)	88.86	83.96(4)	84.26
Switzerland	43.29(3)	43.29	25.08(2)	25.08
United Kingdom	74.99(3)	74.15	74.84(3)	73.82
United States	54.22(3)	54.22	61.73(3)	61.73

changes so that, for each election, total turnout is divided by the size of the population eligible to vote on age grounds *in that election.* For example, in Denmark the voting age was reduced from 21 to 20 in 1972, and then lowered to 18 in 1978, which affected the size of the Danish population of voting age in the 1970s. Information on voting-age requirements is from Mackie and Rose 1982, supplemented by *Keesing's Contemporary Archives* and *Facts on File.* Further restrictions on voter eligibility not based on age (most notably in Switzerland and the United States) are not reflected in the denominator.

Two further points are relevant. First, the International Labour Office/United Nations population-size tables by age report population by age *groups,* and in the age range relevant here, those groups consist of five-year aggregations: 15-19 and 20-24. I have assumed that each five-year age group consists of five equally sized annual age groups. Thus, for example, to obtain the size of a population aged 21 or more, I have subtracted from the total national population all those aged 0-19 plus one-fifth of those aged 20-24. Second, the tables do not list annual figures. To determine the size of the voting age population in a given election year, I have interpolated from the available data. My interpolations are based on estimates of annual population-growth rates assuming logarithmic patterns of growth (for the rationale and procedures used, see Barclay 1958; Jackman 1980).

The country-turnout values for the 1970s listed above are very similar to those reported by Powell (1986, app. 1). Minor discrepancies are probably due to rounding differences and slight differences in the estimates of the size of the voting-age population. A regression of my figures for 1971-80 on Powell's figures for the same period ($N = 19$) produces an intercept that is indistinguishable from zero (with a t-ratio of 0.15), a coefficient of 1.001, and an R^2 of .994. In view of this, it is not surprising that when the models in

Table 2 are reestimated substituting Powell's turnout figures for my own, the estimates obtained are almost identical to those reported in this paper.

Notes

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1. Some may find this expectation counterintuitive. For example, Mueller and Murrell argue instead that "to the extent that greater voter participation is a result of larger turnout by the enfranchised poor, rather than differences in enfranchisement across countries, one might expect the poor to participate in greater numbers the greater the competition for their support among existing parties. In turn, more party competition can be expected the greater the number of viable political parties" (1986, 139). The last sentence is a nonsequitur. Although the *nature* of political competition may change as the number of parties increases beyond two, there is no reason to believe that more parties should generate more competition (of course, one-party systems remain monopolies that are beyond the scope of this paper).

2. I am hardly the first to address the role of electoral decisiveness. Most attention, however, has centered on the role of decisiveness in the process of government formation rather than on the decisiveness of the governments that ensue (e.g., Dahl 1966; Rae 1971b; Strom 1984). And electoral decisiveness is seldom seen as part of the institutionally induced incentive structure that shapes the volume of electoral participation.

3. Gosnell also concluded that turnout in Switzerland was lower than in the rest of Europe. His explanation: "In Switzerland, there are many more elections than in the other countries studied. The Swiss have shown the same indifference toward the election of minor officers that is manifested in the United States" (1930, 186-87).

4. As Powell (1986, 21) notes, France is the only other country with voluntary voter registration, but French citizens are required to register in their community and to obtain identification cards, which encourages voter registration.

5. In the case of France, Lijphart treats the Fourth and Fifth Republics separately. The measures of electoral disproportionality and multipartyism employed here refer to the Fifth Republic.

6. The figures in Table A-1 probably understate Swiss voter turnout somewhat given the relatively high number of alien residents coupled with the stringent requirements for citizenship in Switzerland. Powell judges that this accounts for much, but not all, of the difference between Switzerland and the United States in voter-turnout rates during the 1970s (see Powell 1986, app. 3 for further discussion).

7. For the 1960s, the minimum voter-turnout rate is an even lower 25% for Switzerland, reflecting the disenfranchisement of women.

8. In either case, there are 11 degrees of freedom. The only differences between the two sets of estimates occur with the summary statistics. This is due to the fact that excluding Switzerland and the United States from the regression analysis reduces the total sum of squares in voter turnout considerably. With these cases excluded ($N = 17$), the R^2 is .820 (F-ratio, 9.99). That the R^2 is higher with these two cases included (see Table 2, col. 2) also reflects that the two country-dummy variables "fit" the observed Swiss and U.S. turnout scores exactly.

9. This is not to denigrate the significance of the Swiss disenfranchisement of women before 1971. However, as I have already noted, Switzerland has been removed from the statistical analysis.

10. More specifically, the group-party linkage variable has no systematic effect on turnout net of the other variables listed in Table 2.

11. The only institutional changes in the United States since 1960 have been those involved with voting-rights legislation. Because this legislation was designed to increase turnout, the decline in U.S. voting rates since 1960 obviously cannot be explained in terms of the kinds of institutional factors I have considered in this paper.

12. While the model has been estimated with Switzerland and the United States excluded, it is interesting to note that it does imply comparatively low turnout levels in both of these cases. Of the institutional factors I have considered, Switzerland and the United States each have only one turnout-enhancing feature: in the former, a proportional electoral system, and in the latter, a two-party system. However, as the estimates for the country-dummy variables show, turnout rates in these two countries are *much* lower than my model ($N = 17$) implies, which I attribute to their distinctive turnout-inhibiting characteristics, even after 1970.

13. Matters do not improve if we emphasize the importance of "political tradition" in lieu of political culture (Bogdanor 1983). Indeed, my results directly challenge Bogdanor's conclusion that "the comparative study of electoral systems and party systems is likely to be of more use in shedding light on what is unique and particular than in yielding generalizations which do justice to the historical experience of different countries" (1983, 261).

14. Nor can the turnout differences across the industrial democracies be accounted for in terms of a Lerner-style argument that emphasizes the role of literacy and the mass media in generating political

participation (Lerner 1958, chap. 2). All of the states in this study have highly literate populations and well-developed mass-media infrastructures (see, e.g., the figures in World Bank 1983).

15. Skeptics might counter that these national political institutions and laws are themselves a function of political culture. However, if we take the data on national differences in citizens' political orientations described by Powell (1986) and Wolfinger, Glass, and Squire (1985) as identifying national political cultures, then differences in political cultures are not associated with the institutional variations I have addressed in this paper. If political culture is defined in terms much broader than this, it becomes a very blunt analytical instrument.

16. A phrase I first heard uttered by Paul Peretz in an exchange with William F. Buckley, Jr., at Curious Cove, New Zealand, January 1967.

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