

Poor Participation Makes Politics More Pro-Poor

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Theoretical Foundations

There are two straightforward sets of logics as to why increased voter participation will result in greater overall distribution in democracies.¹ The first is born of the rational choice framework. According to the Meltzer-Richards median voter theory, if the median voter earns less than the mean income, the state will redistribute to maximize that voter's income (Meltzer and Richard 1981). If, however, the poor do not participate, this mechanism breaks down, as the median voter and the median citizen will not necessarily be the same.²

As high propensity voters tend to be wealthier and more educated (Verba et al. 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Devroye 2001), as well as less supportive of redistribution (Bennett and Resnick 1990), when turnout contracts the electorate tends to become disproportionately richer. Conversely, the greater turnout, the more the poor are anticipated to be represented, decreasing the relative income of the median voter, and increasing pressure for redistribution.³ Further, according to this theory, the effect of turnout on distribution will likely be strongest when inequality is greatest, as the depressive effect of additional low-income voters on the median income of the electorate will increase (Franzese 2001).

From the neo-Marxist paradigm, we come to a similar conclusion regarding the role of turnout.⁴ According to power resource theory, in democracies the numerically large working

¹This review of the literature constrains itself to variation in participation and opportunities for participation in democracies. It does not include a discussion of the effects of democratic transition on redistribution. See for example Kammass and Sarantides (2018) and Gradstein and Milanovic (2004) for discussions of this association. Nevertheless, occasions of the extension of the franchise within democratic systems, such as women's suffrage or the US Voting Rights Act, are included as the regime itself remained intact.

²This helps to explain why direct examinations of the relationship between inequality and redistribution fail to observe the association anticipated by median voter theory (e.g. Rodriguez 1999; Perotti 1996; Lindert 2004).

³The association between turnout and class-bias is viewed by many as self-evident, with some scholars going so far as to use turnout as a measure of class-bias in the electorate (Peterson and Rom 1989). Of course, however, this correlation is imperfect. For example, one analysis from the United States (1986) found turnout accounts for only 16% of the class bias in participation (Hill and Leighley 1992). Moreover, in many developing contexts, where redistribution is a less salient political issue, the rich may actually participate at a lower rate than the poor (Kasara and Suryanarayan 2015).

⁴So much so that there is some scholarship attempting to unify median voter theory and power resource theory using turnout as the bridge (Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005; Wong 2017; Mahler 2008). "The key to this Synthesis is the proposition that the median-voter approach to the politics of redistribution works to the extent that unions, Left

class, who are relatively weak in terms of market resources, will use their more favorable political resources (collective action and the vote) to affect the outcomes of distributive market conflicts, thus producing greater redistribution (Korpi 1989). Therefore, the more people are organized (in unions) and vote (for left governments) the more robust the welfare state (Korpi 1989; J. Pontusson 2013; Huber and Stephens 2012).

The empirical implication of this logic for the relationship between turnout and redistribution is largely the same as the Meltzer-Richards model. Higher turnout - which will generally increase the political power of the working class - will increase social spending. The principal difference between these theories is that power resource theory centers the working class as a group, represented by trade unions and ideologically left-wing parties, rather than the rational choice emphasis on the individual.

Cross-National Evidence

Looking at OECD states from 1960-1993, Franzese found turnout had a positive association with transfers, measured as social security, social assistance, unfunded pensions, and welfare benefits. Using an interaction term, he further showed that turnout had the greatest effect when inequality was high - as predicted by median voter theory. Finally, he found trade unions had a strong independent effect on spending, as predicted by power resource theory (Franzese 2001). This association is consistently identified throughout the literature for OECD states during the second half of the 20th century.⁵ Lindert, using data from the turn of the last century (1880-1930), further showed greater turnout correlated with greater social transfers even for nascent Western democracies (1994).

The positive relationship between turnout and redistributive policy in rich democracies

parties, or other actors mobilize low-income workers to participate in the political process (Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005, 450)."

⁵Hicks and Swank (1992) and Lindert (1996) both demonstrated the association between turnout and social spending using OECD data from 1960 to the early 1980s. Kenworthy and Pontusson showed turnout, in conjunction with inequality, resulted in greater redistribution using OECD data from 1979-2000 (2005). As did Mahler (2008). Pontusson took another turn half a decade later, this time with a new coauthor, and using an expanded time-frame 1966-2002 (2010). As did Mahler (2014). The one oddity is the work of Moene and Wallerstein. Also studying OECD states (1980-1995), they found that increased turnout reduced spending on insurance against loss of income (2001) as well as pensions and health (2003). They attribute this to the fact that when turnout is lower, the electorate tends to be older, and the elderly disproportionately benefit from such policies. It is unclear why this pair of scholars arrived at the polar opposite results from the rest of the literature when assessing much the same variables and using similar data.

seems to exist for taxation as well. Sabet assessed the association between turnout and the top tax rate from 1974- 2014, finding a 10% increase in turnout predicted around a 2.5% increase in the top tax rate. This effect remained when turnout is instrumented for with compulsory voting (2016).⁶

Moving away from studies of only advanced economies, Larcinese evaluated the association in 41 democratic countries between 1972 and 1998, of which half were not members of the OECD. He again found the expected association (2007).⁷ An additional investigation of 76 countries (1960-1990) in varying states of democratization found that greater participation was indicative of greater government transfers in strong democracies, though not weak democracies - the argument being that in weak democracies state capture by elites prevents effective redistribution. Nevertheless, this study found that in all democracies increased turnout was associated with increased equality: “An increase in the participation rate from 40 to 80 percent... is estimated to reduce the Gini coefficient by around 4, about 10 percent of its mean value (Mueller and Stratmann 2003, 2141).”

Subnational Analysis

Turning to sub-national analysis, several investigations of social spending in the US have shown the association with turnout to hold at the state level (Barnes 2013; Avery and Peffley 2005; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995; Hill and Leighley 1992; Peterson and Rom 1989).⁸⁹ There is reason to believe this association is causal. Using variation in poll taxes and literacy tests as a proxy for turnout of low-income voters, Husted and Kenny show that greater inclusion of less affluent citizens in the electorate increased welfare spending in the US between 1950 and 1988 (1997).^[14]

Outside of the US, most evidence maintains the expected relationship, with a few

⁶In general, compulsory voting, when enforced, has been found to reduce income inequality (Chong and Olivera 2008).

⁷In an unpublished study, this analysis has been further expanded to 51 countries (1990 and 1998) and instrumented for with mandatory voting, again demonstrating the anticipated relationship (Hwang 2017).

⁸Barnes further used a more direct measure of the median voter. This measure did not account for the entirety of turnout's effect, indicating the Meltzer-Richards model is an incomplete explanation of why turnout is associated with increased redistribution (Barnes 2013).

⁹An analysis of counties in Texas found no significant relationship between turnout and redistribution (Bae 2015). However, that should perhaps be unsurprising given county governments are responsible for a relatively small share of redistributive policy.

exceptions. Using the discontinuous introduction of voting technology in Brazil, Fujiwara showed that increased representation of low-income voters in the electorate resulted in greater public healthcare spending, as well as improved health outcomes among the poor (2015). Similarly, a study from India found that when the poor participate more in local government meetings, spending projects were more likely to be targeted at the neediest groups (Besley, Pande, and Rao 2005). Studies of compulsory voting in Australia (Fowler 2013) and Switzerland (Bechtel, Hangartner, and Schmid 2013) found that it increased turnout and, resultantly, increased support for pensions and left policy proposals respectively.

However, also from Switzerland, Hodler et al. examined the impact of the introduction of postal voting, which demonstrably increased turnout, on welfare spending. They found that postal voting was actually associated with a decline in welfare spending, though the relationship is only statistically significant in the most model driven of their tests (2015).¹⁰ And an analysis of the effect of compulsory voting in Austria, which increased turnout by 10%, failed to demonstrate a statistically significant relationship with public spending - though the insignificant effects on welfare spending were positive in this case (Hoffman, León, and Lombardi 2017).

Extension of Suffrage

A common means which scholars have used to evaluate the effect of increased working-class participation on redistribution is extension of suffrage. Historical evidence from Britain shows that the gradual extension of the franchise resulted in the adoption of redistributive programs (Justman and Gradstein 1999). More generally, examinations of the effect of the lifting of economic restrictions on voting rights in Europe (T. S. Aidt, Dutta, and Loukoianova 2006) and Latin America (Toke S. Aidt and Eterovic 2011) found these reforms resulted in government expansion. A separate study found these reforms in Europe increased taxation (T. S. Aidt, Dutta, and Loukoianova 2006).

In the US, the expansion of suffrage to black Americans with the passage of the 15th Amendment produced a positive “balance of payments” for blacks in education and tax

¹⁰Importantly, Hodler et al. do demonstrate that it was disproportionately lower educated voters who entered as a result of the reform (2015).

policies in the 1880s; however, after the institution of Jim Crow, which re-disenfranchized blacks in the South, this balance quickly turned negative (???). Conversely, re-enfranchisement following the Voting Rights Act resulted in greater transfers in states which had previously prevented the participation of (disproportionately poor) black citizens (Cascio and Washington 2012).¹¹

Similarly, making use of the gradual introduction of women's suffrage in the United States (Lott and Kenny 1999) and Switzerland (Abrams and Settle 1999), and the fact that women tend to make less money than men, scholars have shown that the greater inclusion of low-income (female) voters increased social spending and transfers, in Switzerland by 28%. Aidt and Dallal evaluated the effect of women's suffrage in six European democracies (1869-1960), finding it increased social spending by 3.2-3.8% in the long run (2008).

Mechanisms

Evaluating the mechanism of the median voter theory is unambiguous. It is not turnout per se which results in greater redistribution, but how turnout reduces the class-bias of the electorate. And indeed, Mahler has twice demonstrated that, as median voter theory would expect, it is, in fact, income skew in the electorate which is driving the relationship between turnout and redistribution (Mahler 2008; Mahler, Jesuit, and Paradowski 2014). Similarly, evaluating the US case, it does appear to be the class-bias accompanying low turnout which drives the association between turnout and welfare spending (Hill and Leighley 1992).

The implications from power resource theory are less straightforward. One might expect that working-class turnout would result in greater success for left-wing parties, however, there are several problems with this reasoning. First, while low-income voters tend to be pro-redistribution, they also tend to be socially conservative (Lipset 1959). Thus, Finseraas's finding that increased turnout, identified by the introduction and removal of early voting, increased support for power resource theory's social democratic left *and* for radical-right parties in Norway is not overly surprising (Finseraas and Vernby 2014).

Second, this logic assumes that parties are divided along class lines, however, this is

¹¹Though earlier research found that white backlash to black participation resulted in reduced social spending in the 1980s (Radcliff and Saiz 1995).

not always the case. Pacek and Radcliff show that in rich democracies higher turnout was associated with increased support for the left, however, it was moderated by the salience of class in party divisions. In countries where class played a smaller role in partisanship, turnout had no association with left party victory (1995).

Third, and most importantly, strategic parties will tailor their policies to the electorate (Terry 2016, 5). If the electorate overall is more or less working-class, then the political center will move and parties will shift their policies accordingly. Thus, it is unsurprising that a meta-analysis of the effect of turnout on the success of left-wing policies and left-wing parties found that 27/36 found a positive effect on left-wing policies¹² but only 11/38 found a positive effect for left-wing parties¹³ (Terry 2016).

Thus, turnout caveats power resource theory in much the same way it did the median voter theory. While left-wing parties and unions are good for equality (Korpi 1989; Huber and Stephens 2012), they actually have to be built on the participation of low-income voters. Pontusson and Rueda show, using OECD data from 1966 to 2002, that the re-distributiveness of Left parties is contingent on the political participation of low-income voters. “Left parties will respond to an increase in inequality only when low-income voters are politically mobilized (J. Pontusson and Rueda 2010, 1).” Similarly, Pontusson shows that while unionization rates are an excellent predictor of equality and government redistribution, their relative effectiveness in that role has declined as they become less representative of the poor (J. Pontusson 2013). Therefore, while left-parties and worker’s organizations are powerful vehicles for building equal societies, to do so, the working class must actually be on board.

¹²Only one found a negative effect, Radcliff and Saiz’s finding that increased black participation results in white backlash and thus reduced social spending (Radcliff and Saiz 1995).

¹³However, only one found a negative effect (again in Switzerland Lutz 2007). Thus, if increased turnout helps anyone, it helps the left.

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