

The Consequences of Battleground and “Spectator” State Residency for Political Participation

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Abstract This study uses pooled NES and state-level turnout data from 1988 through 2004 to assess whether a participation gap is emerging in the United States between the residents of battleground and non-battleground states in presidential elections. The analysis finds that Electoral College (EC) participatory disparities are more likely to occur in voting and meeting attendance than in donating and political discussion. Moreover, it suggests that such disparities are more likely to occur when presidential elections are nationally competitive. The study also demonstrates that when participatory gaps do occur they are the result of a surge in participation among battleground state residents—*not* of citizen withdrawal in safe states, as many EC critics contend.

Keywords Campaign effects · Presidential campaigns · Campaign mobilization · Electoral College · Political participation · Voting · Campaign contributions · Political discussion · Electoral competitiveness

George W. Bush’s ability to win the 2000 presidential election without winning the popular vote reinvigorated calls for abolishing the Electoral College (EC). In 2004, he very nearly lost the EC (e.g. if 60,000 votes had swung to John Kerry in Ohio) while winning the popular vote. Such near misses have been remarkably frequent (Edwards 2004) and may explain why many citizens are dissatisfied with the EC. Recently, journalists have joined the chorus of disapproval with several embracing a proposal to reform the EC by convincing state legislatures to pass laws tying the

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delegation of electoral votes to the national popular vote. In their articles endorsing the proposal, journalists have cited a number of reasons for their support, but one reason repeatedly emerges: that the EC “focuses presidential elections on just a handful of battleground states, and pushes the rest of the nation’s voters to the sidelines” (“Drop Out of the College,” 2006). Hendrik Hertzberg of *The New Yorker* argues that the EC divides the nation into battleground and “spectator” states and is contributing to “the death of participatory politics” in the latter, because no matter what residents of safe states do to influence the outcome of a presidential election, they “can’t make a difference” (Hertzberg 2006).¹

There is no question that the need to win a majority of electoral votes drives how presidential candidates allocate their resources (Shaw 2006; Edwards 2004; Shaw 1999b; Bartels 1985; Brams and Davis 1974). The question, however, is whether this disproportionate attention affects the political participation of voters in battleground and non-battleground states. Using pooled National Election Studies (NES) and state-level turnout data for presidential elections from 1988–2004, I examine the effect of state competitiveness on four distinct forms of political participation: voting, meeting attendance, contributing to a candidate, and discussing politics. The findings suggest that EC participatory gaps emerge in presidential elections that are nationally competitive while such disparities tend to disappear in less competitive years. I also find that EC participatory gaps are more likely to occur and to be larger in certain forms of participation than others. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I argue that the concern of EC critics about the death of participatory politics in safe states is unjustified. The EC gaps identified in the following analysis have all arisen not because safe state residents have withdrawn from the political realm, but because there has been a surge of participation among battleground state residents. I argue that, taken together, these findings should make us more sanguine about EC disparities in participation.

Theory and Expectations

Critics claim that residents of “spectator” states in presidential elections are withdrawing from the political process. This claim suggests that we should see a decline in all forms of participation—not just voting—among safe state residents. If we do find evidence of such a withdrawal, the next question is whether it holds across different kinds of presidential elections, such as those that are competitive at the national level and those that are not. These issues must be considered in light of the fact that presidential campaigning has changed over the last twenty years in terms of the tactics candidates use and the technologies available to them. As I argue below, some of these developments may have mitigated EC participatory effects, while others may have exacerbated them.

¹ To view other newspaper articles, editorials, and columns making similar claims, visit the National Popular Vote’s media archive at <http://www.nationalpopularvote.com/>.

Which Forms of Participation Should be Affected by the EC?

There is considerable disagreement among presidential campaign scholars about what constitutes a “campaign effect” (Shaw 1999a). Most scholars are concerned about the *persuasive* effects of presidential campaigns (Shaw 2006; Johnston et al. 2004; Holbrook 1994, 1996; Finkel 1993), while others have examined their effect on partisanship (Allsop and Weisberg 1988), public opinion (Gelman and King 1993; Ansolabehere et al. 1993), political information (Wattenberg and Brians 1999), and issue preferences and priorities (Alvarez 1997; Wattenberg and Brians 1999). Recently, scholars have begun to shift their attention to the mobilizing effects of presidential campaigns (Holbrook and McClurg 2005; Bergan et al. 2005; Hill and McKee 2005; Gershtenson 2003; Gerber and Green 2000) arguing that this is an especially important issue in an era “when campaigns have lost their local organizational roots” (Holbrook and McClurg 2005, p. 701). Most of these studies, however, have interpreted “mobilization” in a narrow fashion by focusing only on turnout. Few of them have examined other forms of political participation despite the fact that scholars have long argued political participation is multidimensional and that different types of participation are driven by different demographic and political variables (Brady et al. 1995). One study has examined the effect of state competitiveness on political discussion (Wolak 2006), but during a campaign candidates are arguably more interested in convincing citizens to volunteer for the campaign, attend rallies and contribute money than to discuss the election, so the effect of state competitiveness may be stronger for these forms of participation than for political discussion.²

In addition, despite the recognition that the EC determines how presidential candidates allocate their resources, few of the above studies assess the *total* effect of battleground state residency on voters. Some researchers have indirectly addressed this issue by examining the effect of campaign “mechanisms” or candidate practices, such as advertising, candidate visits, phone banking, canvassing efforts, and party transfers, on voters (Shaw 2006; Holbrook and McClurg 2005; Benoit et al. 2004; Gerber and Green 2000; Shaw 1999a). One might assume that these mechanisms are more prevalent in competitive states, but scholars have found that resource allocation in presidential campaigns is “not as targeted as one might expect” (Shaw 2006, p. 108). Advertising and campaign visits, in particular, may be allocated to states where there are close congressional races or where contributors must be appeased (Shaw 2006; Bartels 1985). In addition, battleground state strategies often have “bleeding” effects. For example, voters in parts of Boston share a media market with New Hampshire meaning they will be exposed to the same barrage of ads that the candidates direct at New Hampshire residents (Johnston et al. 2004). Similarly, in 2004, voters in southern New Jersey saw ads that were directed at the southeastern

² Both Jennifer Wolak’s (2006) study and another conducted by Jim Gimpel and his colleagues (2007) assess how state competitiveness affects an index of participatory acts. While such a measure captures how much an individual participates more generally, it does not allow us to assess how state competitiveness affects individual forms of participation.

suburbs of Philadelphia. The distinction between a candidate's EC campaigning strategy—which is usually based on state-level polling data—and how a candidate actually deploys his resources is an important one for the purposes of this analysis because the use of resources for any reason other than an EC victory might mitigate the emergence of an EC participatory gap. Thus, to assess the total effect of living in a battleground state on voter participation, one must use a measure of competitiveness that does not involve campaign practices, but rather captures the candidates' perceptions of which states are battleground states and which ones are not. I will return to this issue in the "Data and Methods" section below.

A handful of studies have explicitly assessed how living in a battleground state affects voter participation. Three single election studies (Bergan et al. 2005; Holbrook and McClurg 2005; Hill and McKee 2005) and one multi-election study (Wolak 2006) have examined turnout differences. Both Hill and McKee and Wolak found that battleground state turnout was significantly higher in the 2000 election, but Holbrook and McClurg found no difference and conclude that in terms of mobilization, "the competitive environment is not terribly important" (701). However, Daniel Bergan and his colleagues offer more evidence of a growing turnout gap between battleground and non-battleground states by showing that there was a 5% difference in the 2004 election. In terms of other forms of participation, Wolak concludes that a state's competitiveness, as measured by its partisan composition and the level of competition in the state legislature, "are not significant influences" on campaign activity (2006, p. 360). These inconclusive findings suggest that both more research and more *theorizing* about the types of participation that should be affected by battleground state residency are needed.

This study examines the effect of state competitiveness on voting, meeting attendance, donating and political discussion. As mentioned above, scholars have demonstrated that these forms of participation are quite distinct. For example, a person may have only one vote, but she can attend as many meetings, give as much money, or discuss politics as much as her time and checkbook will allow (Verba et al. 1995). There is reason to believe, however, that a state's competitiveness will affect the degree to which citizens engage in each of these forms of participation differently. This is because state competitiveness not only drives campaign mobilization activities, but may also affect the calculation that citizens make about the likelihood of their participation affecting an election's outcome. Because campaigns are more likely to mobilize voters in competitive states, residents of competitive states have more opportunities to participate and are more likely to be asked to do so. But the pay off for engaging in each form of participation is determined by the way presidential elections operate. For example, a citizen's vote can only affect the outcome of the presidential election in his own state. One can make a similar argument about attending a candidate's meeting, but a person can donate and potentially affect the outcome of an election anywhere in the country. This may explain why two recent studies, which examined the geographic origins of presidential campaign contributions, found that the competitiveness of a state had no effect on the amount of money candidates raised in it (Panagopoulos and Bergan

2004; Gimpel et al. 2006).³ As a result, the analysis is more likely to reveal significant EC participatory gaps in voting and meeting attendance than donating.

Political discussion is an altogether different form of participation than those discussed above because it is less clear how it affects electoral outcomes. People usually talk about politics because politics interest them.⁴ If political interest is higher in battleground states, one might expect higher levels of political discussion. Previous research is inconclusive on this point, however, with three studies finding no difference in the political interest of battleground and safe state residents (Wolak 2006; Benoit et al. 2004; Lipsitz 2004) and one finding a sizeable difference (Gimpel et al. 2007). The first three studies did find, however, that battleground state residents have higher levels of political knowledge, which is a significant predictor of political discussion. This suggests political discussion may be substantially higher in competitive states.

The hypotheses concerning the effects of the EC strategies on different forms of political participation already suggest that the concern of EC critics about the “death of participatory politics” in safe states is likely overstated. If one defines political participation more broadly and carefully considers how each form might be affected by the EC strategies adopted by candidates, safe state residents have an incentive to withdraw from only two forms of participation: voting and meeting attendance. By contrast, there is no reason to expect an EC gap in donating because the effect of contributing to a presidential candidate is not geographically constrained—a dollar raised in Florida or New York can be spent anywhere. While I expect to see an EC gap emerge in political discussion—at least in the most recent elections—this is not because I expect safe state residents to discuss politics *less*, but because I expect battleground state residents to discuss politics *more* due to their higher levels of political knowledge.

When Should We See EC effects?

In addition to examining a broader range of participation forms, I analyze data from the last five presidential elections, which makes it possible to offer broader claims about the effects of EC campaigning strategies.⁵ Much of the work that has examined these effects has analyzed data from a single election year (Hill and McKee 2005; Benoit et al. 2004) but there are several problems with this approach. First, presidential campaigning has changed in crucial ways during the last two decades. For example, in 1992, Bill Clinton’s campaign team took the

³ To be more precise, Costas Panagopoulos and Daniel Bergan (2006) found that state competitiveness had no effect on the amount of money raised by candidates in 2004, while Jim Gimpel and his colleagues found inconsistent effects with Republicans more likely to generate money in battleground states and Democrats less likely to do so (2006, 636). One should note that both of these studies examine the effect of state competitiveness on *total* contributions, whereas I am interested in the effect of it on the percentage of the population donating. The extant literature does not speak directly to this question.

⁴ The NES does ask respondents if they tried to persuade someone to vote for a particular candidate during the campaign. Advocacy, however, is just one form of political discussion. Since I am interested in the question of whether battleground state residency encourages people to talk about politics *for any reason*, I use the current measure.

⁵ These claims are admittedly suggestive given the fact that I am examining only five elections.

unprecedented step of purchasing political advertisements almost exclusively in local media markets rather than on the national networks (Devlin 1993). Since then, most presidential candidates have followed suit with the result that voters in many states see few political advertisements—sometimes none at all—while voters in a handful of key battleground states are inundated with appeals. As a result, I have included one election in my analysis that occurred before this new strategy was adopted (1988). More recently, we have seen how presidential candidates have begun to integrate the internet into their arsenal of campaign media, providing voters with access to virtually unlimited stores of information about the candidates. In 2004, we saw how the Internet made it possible for voters in safe states to be active campaign volunteers during the campaign season. Not only did groups such as MoveOn.org create on-line phone-banks for volunteers, making it easier for voters in safe states to make GOTV calls to voters in battleground states, but many groups held “virtual” meetings, which meant volunteers from across the country could participate in meetings while sitting in their own homes. Activists in safe states also used the Internet to coordinate trips to battleground states. Thus, the Internet may be mitigating some of the effects that safe state residency has on participation.

Another factor to consider is how media coverage of presidential elections over the last decade has affected the saliency of the “battleground state” concept among voters. The media has increased their coverage of battleground areas, especially in the last four election cycles, and focused more attention on candidate resource allocation strategies (Goux 2006). If battleground state residents believe their participation has a greater chance (or if safe state residents believe their participation has less of chance) of affecting presidential election outcomes as a result of the media’s focus on campaign strategy, we may see this reflected in the emergence or widening of EC participatory gaps in more recent elections.

Finally, one must examine different types of presidential election years, especially competitive and non-competitive years. I expect to see greater EC campaign strategy effects when elections are close than when there is a clear frontrunner. Close elections provide citizens with both external and internal motivations to participate (Jackson 1996; Cox and Munger 1989). Tight elections encourage candidates to mobilize battleground state residents and to recruit activists to aid campaign efforts, thereby applying an external pressure on citizens to participate. Internally, citizens living in swing states may be motivated to participate because they believe the potential benefit of doing so is greater when elections are closer or because such elections heighten their sense of civic duty. This means we should see the emergence of EC participatory gaps in competitive presidential election years, such as 2000 and 2004, and the disappearance of such disparities in non-competitive elections, such as 1996. The election in 1988 between George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis started out as a relatively close race, but Bush pulled away easily, especially after the second debate. Thus, I consider the 1988 election to be moderately competitive and, as a result, to give rise to smaller EC participatory disparities than the more recent elections.

I also hypothesize that EC participatory gaps will be larger in years when parties and candidates emphasize grassroots campaigning, especially canvassing. Although

there is little evidence that political ads mobilize citizens (Huber and Arceneaux 2007; Lau et al. 2007), numerous studies have found that citizens respond to personal contacts (Green et al. 2003; Gerber and Green 2000). There is evidence that the Bush and Dukakis campaigns waged a fierce ground war in swing states during the 1988 election—the first in which a party (in this case, the Democratic Party) used computerized voting lists in a systematic way to turn out supporters and to locate swing voters (Edsall 1988). In addition, that year both campaigns were flush with record-setting amounts of soft money for ground war activities. In terms of more recent elections, the conventional wisdom is that presidential candidates relied heavily upon political advertising in the 1990s to reach out to voters. Beginning in 1998, however, labor unions began shifting their dollars away from advertising and towards personal contacting (Corrado et al. 2003). The success enjoyed by Democrats in the 1998 and 2000 elections, as a result of this shift, led Republicans to follow suit and begin emphasizing personal canvassing in the 2002 and 2004 elections (Shaw 2006, p. 81). As a result, 2004 was widely recognized as a year of unprecedented voter outreach (Panagopoulos and Weilhauer 2008; Hillygus and Monson 2007; Shaw 2006; Magleby and Patterson 2006; Bergan et al. 2005). This discussion suggests, then, that EC participatory disparities may be larger in 1988 and 2004 than in 2000 because of the fierce ground wars waged by both parties in those years. Although 2000 was a competitive election, the fact that Republicans continued to emphasize political advertising instead of voter outreach during the campaign suggests that EC participatory disparities may have been smaller that year.

This analysis also covers 1992 when a popular third party candidate ran, making the race much more interesting for voters across the country. There is a debate in the literature about whether Perot's presence made the race tighter or less competitive (see Lacy and Burden 1999; Alvarez and Nagler 1995) but in reality, the race was not close. Clinton received 42.9% of the popular vote—compared to Bush's 37.1%—and 68.8% of the EC vote. Thus, I expect to see few EC campaign strategy effects in 1992.

This discussion suggests that EC participatory effects should be largest in 1988, 2000 and 2004 because of the competitiveness of those elections. We are likely to see especially large participatory disparities in 2004 because of the media's attention to battleground state phenomenon and the emphasis that the campaigns placed on voter outreach in that campaign. In those elections years where we observe EC effects, they should be stronger for voting and meeting attendance than for donating because the potential impact of the latter is not geographically constrained. Finally, due to higher levels of voter knowledge in battleground states, we may see small EC participatory differences in political discussion.

Data and Methods

This analysis uses survey data from the 1948–2004 American National Election Studies (NES) Cumulative Data File. The Cumulative File includes all questions that have been asked across at least three years of survey administration making it

appropriate for examining changes in behavior over time. To assess differences in actual turnout levels across states, however, I use state-level turnout data.⁶

In the past, scholars have used a variety of measures to capture state competitiveness in presidential elections. Such measures have included the margin of victory in the state in previous elections (Johnston et al. 2004; Shaw 1999a), the number of ads aired in the state (Wolak 2006; Benoit et al. 2004), and CNN rankings (Bergan et al. 2005). The problem with the first measure is that past margins of victory may not be a good predictor of how close an election is in the current year. The second type of measure is also problematic; the closeness of a state determines, in large part, how many ads will be aired in it, but by using ad airings to capture the former, one is in a sense conflating the cause and the effect. Moreover, other factors do affect how a candidate allocates his resources. In terms of political advertising, previous research has shown that the cost of advertising in a state is a powerful predictor of where candidates choose to spend their dollars (Shaw 2006; Shaw 1999a). In terms of visits, as stated earlier, candidates may make stopovers in states where there are competitive down-ticket races to help other candidates in their party (Shaw 2006; Althaus et al. 2002). Thus, one should use a measure of state competitiveness that is independent of the candidate practices it drives.

Moreover, to avoid the issue of endogeneity, one must use a measure of state competitiveness that reflects candidate strategies early in the campaign. Otherwise, it is unclear whether the fact that a state has been identified as a battleground state causes the candidates to campaign in it, or whether the candidates' attention to a state has made it competitive. Ideally, one would use CNN state rankings (Huber and Arceneaux 2007; Bergan et al. 2005) or margins in state polls (Holbrook and McClurg 2005) prior to the start of the general election to gauge state competitiveness, but these measures are not available for the earlier elections in this study. Instead, I use the categorization of states created by Daron Shaw based on his interviews with presidential campaign consultants (Gimpel et al. 2007; Hill and McKee 2005). Because Shaw was trying to analyze how a state's competitiveness affected candidates' allocation of resources, his measure captures how the candidates saw the electoral battlefield prior to the start of the general election (1999b, p. 896).⁷ For every election from 1988 through 2004, Shaw coded each state as "Base" "Marginal" and "Battleground" from the perspective of each campaign. I summed this ordinal measure across both parties yielding a 5-point measure of state competitiveness, which ranged from "0" if both campaigns deemed a state to be safe to "4" if they both classified it as a battleground state.

⁶ The author acknowledges that the use of self-reported data is not ideal. This is one reason why I use state-level turnout data, rather than the self-reported voting data provided by the NES. In terms of the meeting attendance, donating, and discussion measures, I am assuming that any error in these measures is randomly distributed across the various types of states (battleground, safe, etc.) examined. Since I am interested in a comparison across this range of campaign contexts, any error associated with these measures should not bias my results.

⁷ The one exception is the categorization of states from the perspective of the Dole campaign in 1996. For a discussion of how Daron Shaw developed these measures, see Shaw 1999b for the 1988–1996 presidential election years and chapter 3 of Shaw 2006 for an explanation of his 2000 and 2004 coding.

The studies cited earlier raise another methodological issue. Several of them include measures of both state competitiveness and campaigning “mechanisms” in the model. For example, both Holbrook and McClurg (2005) and Wolak (2006) include measures of advertising and campaign visits or events along with a measure of state competitiveness in their models explaining political participation. The problem is that most of the effect of a state’s competitiveness on the behavior of its residents is indirect.⁸ In other words, state competitiveness drives ad buying and other mobilization activities, which in turn drive citizens’ behavior. Thus, to capture the full effect of state competitiveness on voters, one must omit all of the mediating variables that measure how candidates actually allocate their resources. Otherwise, one might end up falsely concluding that a state’s electoral competitiveness does not matter. While the question of how various campaign mechanisms or practices affect citizen engagement is no doubt an important issue, this analysis strives to capture the *total* effect of state competitiveness on citizens. Critics of the Electoral College do not care whether participation in battleground states is higher because of campaign mobilization activities or because the residents of these states are more interested in the campaign; they simply care that there is a difference. To determine whether the EC participatory gaps I identify are a result of citizen withdrawal in safe states or a surge of participation in competitive states, however, it is useful to know what might explain their emergence. As a result, I return to this question in the “Mechanisms” section below.

In the following analysis, I assess the effect of living in a competitive state on voting, attending a meeting or rally for a candidate, donating to a campaign, and discussing politics. The state-level voting data was developed by dividing the number of votes cast in each state by the voting eligible population (VEP). The NES data for meeting attendance and donating⁹ are coded “0” or “1” with “1” indicating that the respondent engaged in the behavior during the campaign, while the political discussion measure asks respondents to report the number of days in the previous week that they discussed politics and ranges from 0 to 7. The NES did not ask about political discussion in 1988 so this analysis examines data on this measure from 1992 to 2004.

Figure 1 presents how the responses to these measures varied across the five elections in battleground and safe states.¹⁰ The charts show that there are few consistent differences in the participation rates of people living in these two types of states; this is true if one examines a single form of participation over time or a single year across all four forms of participation. In terms of the former, the rates of

⁸ It is possible that there will be a direct effect as well: residents of the state may recognize how close the election is, which in turn, may encourage them to get involved.

⁹ The NES donating question does not refer specifically to presidential campaigns, which means a person who responds “yes” to it may have made a political contribution to any number of political races. A recent study found, however, that the presence and competitiveness of local campaigns “does not generally improve Republican or Democratic fundraising” (Gimpel et al. 2006, p. 636). Moreover, the analysis controls for the presence of a Senate race in the state. Finally, the fact that the donating question does not refer specifically to presidential campaigns stacks the analysis against finding a presidential state competitiveness effect, yet the analysis reveals one.

¹⁰ For clarity of presentation, I have provided the trend lines for just two categories—the most competitive and the least competitive—of state competitiveness. See Figure 1 in the Supplementary Materials for graphs with all five categories depicted.

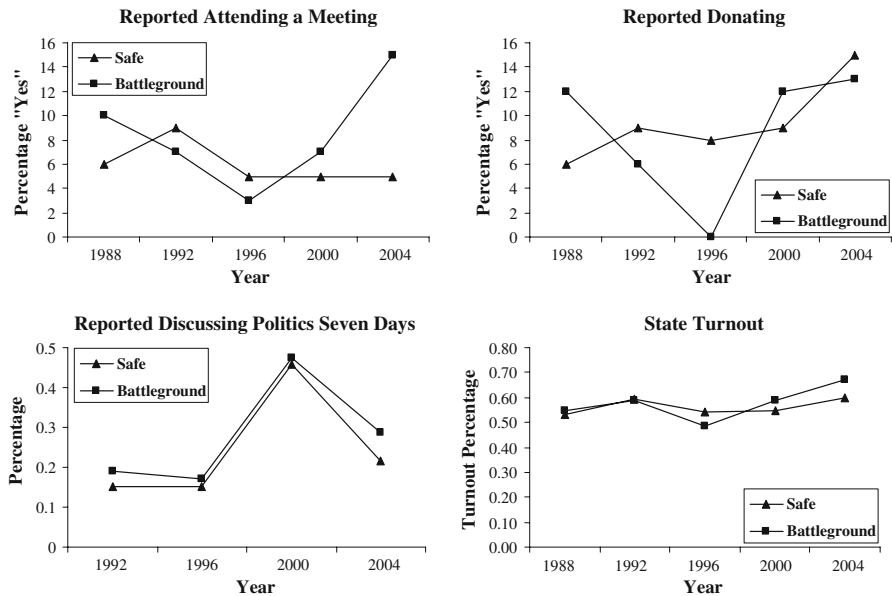


Fig. 1 Frequencies of dependent variables in presidential elections from 1988–2004; *Source:* The data for reported meeting attendance, donating, and political discussion are from the NES Cumulative File, 1948–2004, while the data based on voting eligible population was downloaded from http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm. The measure of political discussion was not asked in 1988. For clarity of presentation, I have presented the frequencies for states with the lowest (safe) and highest (battleground) levels of competitiveness. Graphs with all five categories of competitiveness can be found in Fig. 1 of the Supplementary Materials. A one-way ANOVA test reveals that the differences for meeting attendance are significant at the $p < .05$ level or better except for 1992. The differences for donating are highly significant in 1988 and 1996 ($p < .001$) and marginally significant in 2000 ($p < .10$). It should be noted that while no one reported donating in the most competitive states (coded “4” on the scale of 0–4) in 1996, between 6 and 13% of the respondents reported donating in the other state competitiveness categories that year. Finally, the only significant differences in political discussion and turnout occur in 2004 ($p < .05$). All other differences are statistically insignificant

meeting attendance come the closest to revealing a pattern. In the three most competitive elections (1988, 2000, & 2004), residents of battleground states were more likely to attend a meeting than their safe state counterparts. Although there was no single year in which residents of competitive states participated at higher levels across all four forms of participation, they were more likely than their safe state counterparts to attend a meeting, discuss politics every day, and vote in 2004.¹¹ While it remains to be seen whether these results hold up under multivariate analysis, for the time being they suggest that the death of participatory politics in safe states has been much exaggerated. Moreover, the graphs in Fig. 1 suggest that if an EC gap has begun to emerge, it is not because safe state residents are withdrawing from the political process as EC critics would contend, but because residents of competitive states are becoming more active. If the former were the case, we would expect to see a steady decline in safe state participation, but instead

¹¹ All of the differences I have discussed were statistically significant at $p < .05$ or better.

when EC gaps are observed it appears to be driven by a surge of activity in the most competitive states.¹²

In the following analyses, I use logit models to examine reported meeting attendance and donating, an ordered probit model to examine political discussion, and an ordinary least squares model for the analysis of turnout data. In addition to standard logistic regression models, I also estimated models of meeting attendance and donating using skewed logistic regression and logit models that correct for rare events (King and Zeng 1999). Neither model provided significantly different results. Because of the hierarchical nature of the data (respondents nested in states), I also used HLM 6.05 to estimate models for each of my dependent variables that controlled for a wide variety of state level variables. Again, the results of these models were not significantly different from those that treated the data as non-hierarchical so I have chosen to present the results of the latter.¹³ When analyzing the pooled NES data from 1988 through 2004, I use the post-stratified weights provided by the NES and cluster the standard errors to account for similarities within state samples. Each explanatory model controls for basic demographic variables, including sex, age, and race. In accordance with a resource model of participation, I include three measures of civic skills to explain individual participation levels: educational level, church involvement and whether one is employed (Brady et al. 1995). I use a measure of household income to gauge a respondent's financial resources.

To capture the effect of media exposure, the models include measures of how often an individual reads the newspaper and watches the television network news. The models will also allow us to examine the effect of an individual hailing from a state with a Senate race or one that is from the south. Finally, I interact party identification and strength of partisanship to assess whether the latter's effect is conditioned by the party to which an individual belongs (see Appendix for a description of all the variables).¹⁴

Research has found that along with education, political knowledge and political interest are the strongest predictors of political participation (Verba et al. 1995). Yet studies have also found that political knowledge is higher in battleground states and that political interest may be as well. This suggests that political knowledge and interest may be mediating variables, that is, they are predictors of participation but are themselves predicted by state competitiveness to a certain extent. For the models of participation to capture the *total* effect of living in a battleground state then, these two variables must be omitted. In the final section of this article, I examine the

¹² This is especially true of the EC participation gaps in meeting attendance and voting. Even though such a gap emerged in political discussion in 2004, levels of political discussion plummeted across the country from their 2000 levels.

¹³ See Table 6 in the Supplementary Materials for the results of the HLM analyses.

¹⁴ The strength of partisanship and partisan identification have been interacted by creating a dummy variable for each of the possible categories resulting from such an interaction. This avoids the problems of interpretation associated with the fact that scoring a "0" on the strength of partisanship measure determines whether one is an Independent. The omitted category in the analysis is pure Independent. I combined Independents leaning towards the Democrats with weak Democrats and Independents leaning towards the Republicans with weak Republicans because these categories of individuals behaved in a similar manner.

degree to which political knowledge and political interest mediate the relationship between state competitiveness and participation by examining what happens to the size of the state competitiveness effect when the two variables are added to the explanatory models.

To determine the effect of state competitiveness on actual voting, I regress voter turnout rates on three independent variables. The first is the dummy variable indicating whether a state is a battleground state. The second is another dummy variable indicating whether there was a Senate race in the state. The last is the average turnout rate of the state in the previous two midterm elections, which allows me to control for a state's voting rate when presidential candidate EC strategies have no bearing on it. Thus, this measure captures the effects of other variables that might explain state-level differences in turnout, such as the income and education of the state's residents.¹⁵

Analysis

If Hertzberg's claim that we are witnessing the death of participatory politics in safe states is correct, then the analysis should reveal significantly lower levels of political participation among the residents of these states. Moreover, we should see a steady decline in the activity of safe state residents if they are withdrawing from the political realm. Table 1 presents the models for attending a meeting or rally, donating, and discussing politics. By pooling the data for all five presidential elections from 1988–2004¹⁶ and interacting the state competitiveness variable with each of the year dummy variables, we will be able to see if there is a significant EC participatory gap in any given year *and* whether there is any significant change in participation rates between years. Table 1 presents the three models for meeting attendance, donating and discussing politics. Because it is difficult to interpret the meaning of logit and ordered probit coefficients, Fig. 2 presents the predicted probability of a typical respondent¹⁷ engaging in the behavior of interest in battleground and safe states across all five elections. For clarity of presentation, I present the predicted probabilities of participation in the most competitive and least competitive states. All predicted probabilities were calculated using CLARIFY (Tomz et al. 2001) and the interactions were interpreted in accordance with the method prescribed by Brambor et al. (2006).

¹⁵ To test Wolak's (2006) contention that the partisan composition of a state may drive political participation rather than its battleground state status, I ran all of my pooled models using the same aggregated CBS News/New York Times national polls data collected by Gerald Wright, John McIver, and Robert Erikson (http://php.indiana.edu/~wright1/cbs7603_pct.zip) and found it did not diminish the battleground state effect on any of the forms of participation examined here. However, the percentage of independents in the state did have a significant independent effect on intention to vote.

¹⁶ 1988 (as well as the interaction term) is omitted in the first two models and 1992 in the third because the question about political discussion was not asked in 1988.

¹⁷ By "typical" I mean an employed, white, male respondent who is a strong Democrat, registered to vote, does not live in the south, and has a Senate race going on in his state. The year is set for the year in question and the interaction terms are also set to reflect the year in question as well as the level of state competitiveness that I am depicting in the charts (i.e. "Safe" and "Battleground"). All other variables in the analysis, such as age and education, are set to their mean.

Table 1 Pooled logit and ordered probit models showing the effect of state competitiveness on meeting attendance, donating and discussing politics from 1988 to 2004

	Attended meeting (Logit)		Donated (Logit)		Discussed politics (ordered probit)	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Age	-.02	.03	.04**	.02	.01 [#]	.01
Age*	.0001	.0003	-.0002	.0002	-.0002**	.0001
White	-.07	.11	.21 [#]	.12	.17***	.04
Male	.25 [#]	.13	.13	.11	.06**	.03
Education	.47***	.06	.45***	.07	.18***	.02
Income	.05	.06	.39***	.07	.06***	.02
Church attendance	.10***	.03	.02	.04	.01	.01
Employed	-.05	.15	.11	.11	-.004	.04
South	-.03	.11	-.03	.13	.07 [#]	.04
Senate race	-.21 [#]	.12	-.05	.11	.08 [#]	.04
Read newspaper	.08***	.02	.09*	.02	.04***	.01
Watch television network news	.05**	.02	.05**	.02	.07***	.01
Registered	1.04***	.25	1.05***	.29	.35***	.05
Lean or weak democrat	.30	.28	.37*	.17	.31***	.04
Strong democrat	1.05***	.25	.74***	.19	.59***	.06
Lean or weak republican	.09	.31	.19	.20	.40***	.06
Strong republican	.87**	.30	1.16***	.19	.69***	.06
1992	.56*	.29	.29	.31	—	—
1996	-.04	.40	-.20	.33	-.02	.11
2000	-.13	.38	.24	.32	.95***	.09
2004	-.29	.41	.93**	.35	.22*	.11
State competitiveness	.18**	.06	.15*	.06	.03	.02
State competitiveness* 1992	-.14 [#]	.08	-.17 [#]	.09	—	—
State competitiveness* 1996	-.07	.12	.05	.11	-.01	.04
State competitiveness* 2000	-.08	.10	-.07	.09	-.03	.03
State competitiveness* 2004	.13	.11	-.20*	.09	.02	.04
Intercept	-5.60***	.66	-8.68***	.49	—	—
<i>N</i>	7,809		7,810		6,074	
Log likelihood	-1716.48		-1914.03		-10335.39	
Pseudo R^2	.10		.17		.07	

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; # $p < 0.1$; one-tailed (coefficients); two-tailed (auxiliaries). Source: NES Cumulative File. All analyses use NES post-stratified weights. Robust standard errors clustered by “state” reported. Pure independent and 1988 are the excluded categories

Of the three behaviors examined using NES data, I expected the clearest EC participatory gap to emerge in meeting attendance after 2004 due to the competitiveness of that election, the increased saliency of the battleground state concept among the public, and the emphasis that the campaigns placed on voter outreach during the campaign. The largest EC gap in participation (14%, $p < .01$)

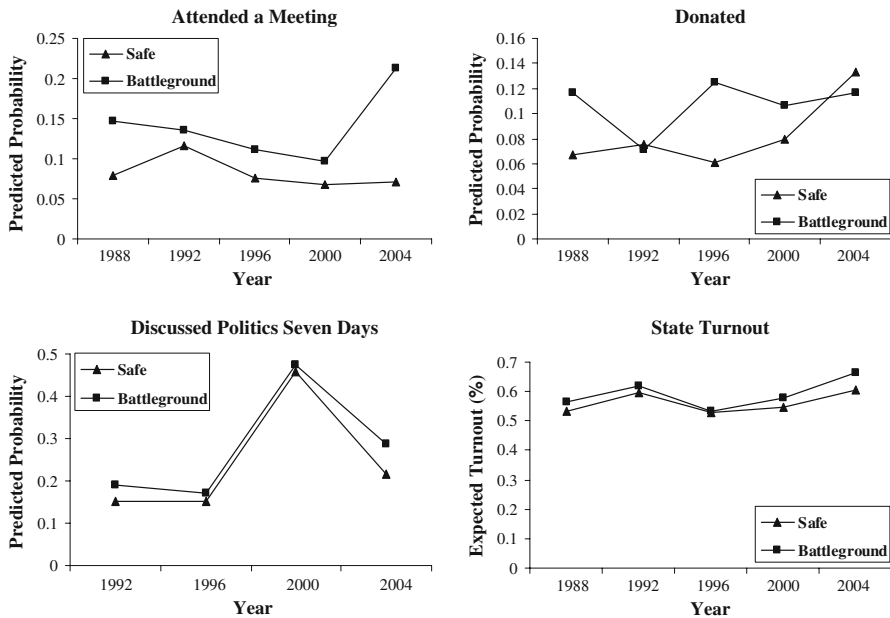


Fig. 2 The difference in the predicted probability of attending a meeting, donating, discussing politics and voting for residents of safe and battleground states, 1988–2004; Source: The data for reported meeting attendance, donating, and political discussion are from the NES Cumulative File, 1948–2004, while the data based on voting eligible population was downloaded from http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm. The predicted probabilities were calculated based on the models in Tables 1 and 2. The measure of political discussion was not asked in 1988. For clarity of presentation, I have presented the predicted probabilities for states with the lowest (safe) and highest (battleground) levels of competitiveness. The differences in the predicted probability of meeting attendance were statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level in 1988 and 2004. The differences in donating were significant at the $p < .05$ level in 1988 and 1996, and marginally significant in 2000 ($p < .10$, one-tailed). Marginally significant differences in political discussion occurred in 1992 and 2004 ($p < .10$, two-tailed), while the EC differences in turnout were significant at $p < .05$ in 2000, $p < .01$ in 2004, and $p < .10$, one-tailed, in 1988. All predicted probabilities calculated using CLARIFY. The analyses for reported meeting attendance, donating and political discussion use NES post-stratified weights and standard errors clustered at the state level

did in fact occur in 2004 with battleground state respondents being three times more likely (21 vs. 7%) as their safe state counterparts to attend a candidate's event. The next highest EC gap in meeting attendance occurred in 1988 when the predicted probability of attending such an event was 7% higher (15 vs. 8%, $p < .01$) in battleground states. None of the other observed differences were statistically significant. The fact that significant EC participatory disparities in meeting attendance occurred in 1988 and 2004—and not in 2000—suggests that presidential campaigns in which both candidates emphasize personal canvassing may be more likely to lead to higher levels of meeting attendance in battleground states.

The first graph in Fig. 2 provides us with the opportunity to consider the question of whether EC gaps occur because safe state residents withdraw from political life, or rather, because there is a surge of activity among those living in more competitive

states. The only fluctuation in the meeting attendance of safe state residents occurred in 1992 when there was a popular third party candidate. However, the predicted probability of a respondent attending a candidate's event actually *increased* in that year to 12%. In the other four elections, the predicted probability of engaging in this behavior hovered around seven or 8%. While it is impossible to discern whether the EC disparity in 1988 is the result of a surge or withdrawal, the gap in 2004 is clearly the result of a powerful surge of activity in battleground states. The predicted probability of a respondent attending a meeting doubled between 2000 and 2004 ($p < .01$). Thus, the meeting attendance data offer little evidence of withdrawal.

The second chart in Fig. 2 reveals that the predicted probability of a respondent donating has been fairly level in battleground states since 1988 with the exception of a sizeable dip in 1992. The predicted probability of contributing in safe states was relatively stable through 2000 but then nearly doubled between that election and 2004. What is surprising about these findings is that the probability of donating was significantly higher in competitive states than safe states in three years: 1988, 1996, and 2000. In these three years, the EC difference in predicted probability was 5 ($p < .05$), 6 ($p < .05$), and 3 ($p < .10$, one tailed) percent, respectively. Part of the explanation for these results may be that some safe states, which are typically the biggest contributors and considered to be chronic “spectator” states—California, Texas, and New York—have actually enjoyed battleground state status in the last five elections. For example, New York and Texas were battleground states in 1988, while California was in 1996. I tested this hypothesis by excluding these states from the analyses in the relevant years, but the EC gap remained. Irrespective of what accounts for this disparity, which I will examine more closely in the next section, it disappears completely in 2004. This is because residents of safe states were much more likely to contribute during that heated election. In fact, in 2004 the predicted probability of safe state residents donating to a candidate increased significantly from the 2000 election (from 8% to 13%, $p < .05$). This suggests, just as the bivariate data do, that people living in safe states may be starting to compensate for their lack of voting power by wielding their financial power. If this is true, then the assumption that people are withdrawing from politics in safe states is simply wrong; instead of withdrawing from politics, citizens may be exploring new ways of flexing their political muscle.

The third chart in Fig. 2 shows that an EC gap in political discussion appeared in two years: 1988 and 2004. In 1988, the predicted probability of engaging in political discussion every day was 3% higher in battleground states than in safe states (19 vs. 15%, $p < .10$). Although political discussion was significantly higher in 2000 than in any other year, the heightened discussion appears to have occurred almost equally in both battleground and non-battleground states.¹⁸ In 2004, the probability that a person discussed politics every day jumped from 22% in the least competitive states to 29% in the most competitive. In the following section, I examine the roles that political knowledge and interest played in generating this difference.

¹⁸ The NES question about political discussion is typically asked on the post-election survey. Thus, the elevated levels of discussion in 2000 were likely due to the events surrounding the Florida recount.

Voting

To assess whether an EC participatory gap has emerged in voting, I use state-level turnout data based on the voting eligible population, and control for the average turnout in the previous two midterm elections, as well as whether or not there was a Senate race in the state during the relevant presidential election year. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2 and graphs of the predicted probabilities are displayed in Fig. 2. The latter shows that a small EC participatory gap (3%) in this form of participation occurred as early as 1988, but it was only marginally significant ($p < .10$, one-tailed). The difference disappeared in 1992 and 1996 and reemerged in 2000 and 2004. In 2000, the predicted turnout rate was 55% in the safest states vs. 58% in battleground states ($p < .05$), a 3% difference. In 2004 the difference in predicted turnout rate grew to 6% (60% vs. 66%, respectively ($p < .01$)). Thus, in the two least competitive years, we see no difference in turnout rates between battleground and non-battleground states, but as the elections get more competitive, the gap gets larger. These findings suggest that in non-competitive years we should expect no difference in voting between battleground and non-battleground state residents, but in competitive years, EC disparities in turnout are likely to emerge.

Despite this potential trend in voting, the final graph in Fig. 2 suggests—as do most of the other graphs—that there is no reason to fear that safe state residents are withdrawing from the political process. In fact, in the two most recent elections,

Table 2 Pooled OLS regression model showing the effect of state competitiveness on turnout rates from 1988 to 2004

	Turnout rate	
	β	S.E.
Average turnout in last 2 midterm elections	.59***	.03
Senate race in state	-.001	.01
1992	.06***	.02
1996	-.0002	.02
2000	.01	.01
2004	.07***	.01
State competitiveness	.01 [#]	.004
State competitiveness* 1992	-.002	.01
State competitiveness* 1996	-.01	.01
State competitiveness* 2000	.0004	.01
State competitiveness* 2004	.01	.01
Intercept	.28***	.02
N	255	
Log likelihood	449.70	
R Squared	.67	

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; # $p < 0.1$; one-tailed (coefficients); two-tailed (auxiliaries)

Source: http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm

there has been a surge of participation in both competitive and non-competitive states. The growing EC gap is explained by the simple fact that the surge has been larger in the former than in the latter. The analysis in the next section explains what accounts for this surge of participation in competitive states.

Explaining EC Participatory Gaps: The Mechanisms

The previous analyses found that EC participatory gaps emerged in every form of participation examined in at least two presidential elections. In the following analysis, I examine what accounts for these observed differences by focusing on two kinds of causes: internal and external. As mentioned above, some studies have found that residents of battleground states exhibit higher levels of knowledge and engagement, which may account for their higher levels of participation.¹⁹ But it is also possible that external factors, such as contact from a party or group may account for the increased levels of activity in competitive states (Bergan et al. 2005). A final possibility is that some of the dependent variables of interest, especially meeting attendance, may be affecting others, such as donating and voting. To test which mechanisms account for the observed EC participatory gaps, I ran five models for meeting attendance and six for donating, political discussion, and voting. The first model in each series included none of the mechanisms that might account for the participatory gap and served as the base model. I then ran a series of models with each including a single explanatory mechanism. The final model in each series includes all of the explanatory mechanisms.²⁰ To explore the explanations for the EC participatory gap in voting, I use the NES self-reported data. Recall that earlier analyses revealed the differences in actual turnout were 3% in 1988, 3.5% in 2000, and 6% in 2004. I found no difference between the reported voting of battleground and safe state residents in 2000, a 6% difference in 1988 ($p < .05$) and a 6% difference in 2004 ($p < .05$).²¹ Because of the discrepancies between the actual turnout data and the self-reported data for voting, the findings discussed below should be viewed as merely suggestive.

Figure 3 provides a graphic representation of the findings. To start, the first two columns in the first graph depict the difference in the predicted probability of attending a meeting between a resident of a non-competitive state and one that is highly competitive for the two years in which such a gap was observed (1988 and 2004). The next two columns show the effect of including political knowledge in the model. Although political knowledge seems to reduce the size of the difference by about 18% in 2004 (the size of the difference in predicted probability is reduced

¹⁹ I also examined whether believing the race is close in your state—another form of internal motivation—accounted for any of the EC participatory differences, but it did not. In the model explaining reported voting, believing the presidential race in one's own state is close does increase the likelihood that individuals will vote, but—strangely—residing in a competitive state is a weak predictor of whether a person believes the race in his or her state is close. The correlation between the two is a miniscule .02.

²⁰ All of these models can be found in Tables 2–5 of the Supplementary Materials.

²¹ See Table 1 in the Supplementary Materials for the full model showing the effect of state competitiveness on reported voting and Figure 2 for the predicted probability graph.

from about nine to 7%), it seems to explain virtually none of the gap in 1988. What this means is that people living in battleground states in 2004 were more knowledgeable and this increased the likelihood that they attended meetings while battleground state residency had little effect on political knowledge in 1988.²² The next two columns show that political interest explains a significant portion of the EC participatory gap in both 1988 and 2004. In the former, including political interest in the model²³ reduces the difference by 25% in 1988 (from four to 3%) and almost one-third in 2004 (from nine to 6%). The next two columns indicate that being contacted by a group or party also explains about 20% of the gap in 1988 and nearly half of it (44%) in 2004. The final model shows what happens when all of the explanatory mechanisms are included. Higher levels of political knowledge, interest, and mobilization explain over half (61%) of the 2004 gap in meeting attendance, while they explain approximately 25% of the 1988 difference.²⁴

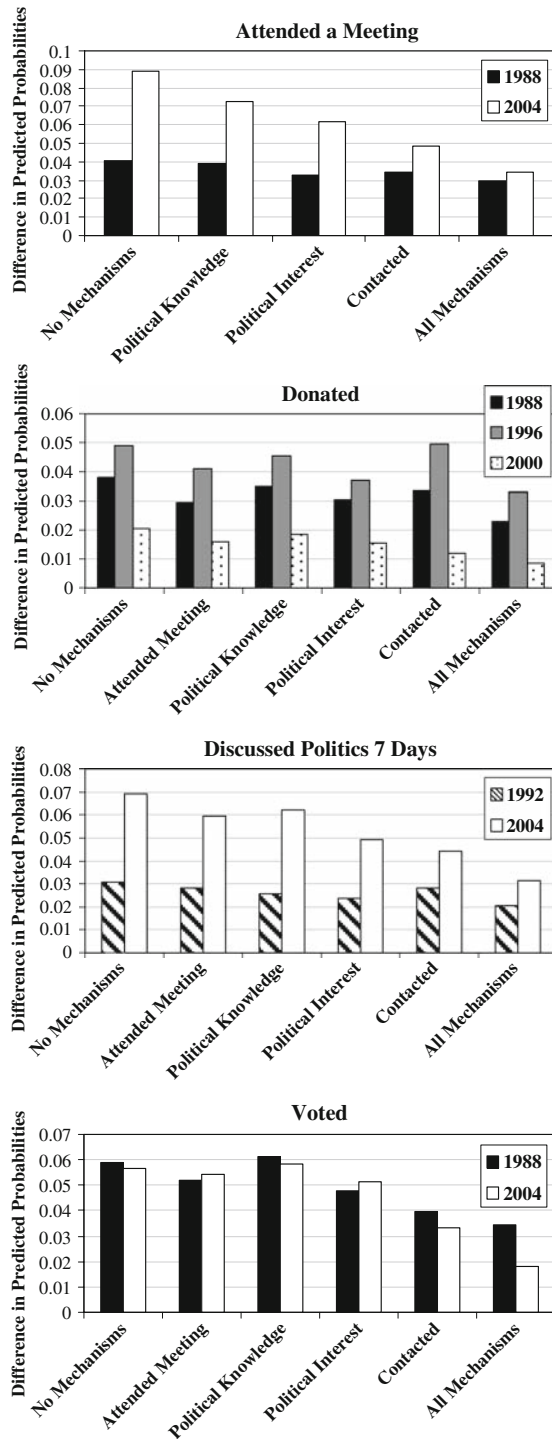
The next chart explains why donating was higher in competitive states in 1988 (solid black column), 1996 (grey column), and 2000 (dotted white column). In 1988 and 1996, meeting attendance and higher levels of political interest were the strongest explanations for the difference. Including meeting attendance in the model reduces the 1988 predicted probability gap by 21% and the 1996 difference by 16%. Similarly, political interest accounts for 20% of the difference in 1988 and 25% in 1996. These mechanisms were crucial in 2000 as well, but so were campaign contacts. Including meeting attendance in the model reduced the 2000 donating gap by 23%, while political interest accounted for 25% of it. Being contacted, however, accounted for 41% of the participatory gap. This analysis suggests that even though the political contributions of safe state residents are just as valuable as those of people living in competitive states, donating—at least prior to the 2004 election—was driven by the same kinds of factors that affect other kinds of participation, such as political interest and being contacted. It also makes sense that people who attend political meetings are more likely to be approached for contributions. Two questions remain, however. First, previous research has found that the amount of money raised by Democrats and Republicans in battleground and safe states is similar, yet I find that people in battleground states are more likely to donate (setting aside 2004 for the moment). This finding suggests that the total amount of contributions from a state and the percentage of people donating from that state are driven by different factors. It also suggests that people in battleground states may be making contributions in smaller amounts.

²² It is also possible that the causal arrow points in the opposite direction, i.e. the people who attended meetings in battleground states learned from their experience. Political knowledge, however, is recognized as being one of the most significant predictors of political participation, so it is more likely that the first interpretation holds.

²³ Each of the models includes a single mechanism, so political knowledge is not accounted for in this model.

²⁴ The portion of the participatory difference that is explained when all of the mechanisms are included is smaller than the sum of all the percentages explained in the previous models because the explanatory variables are correlated.

Fig. 3 Explaining the EC participatory gaps in meeting attendance, donating, and voting; source: The data are from the NES Cumulative File, 1948–2004. The “No Mechanisms” columns depict the total difference in the predicted probability of a safe state resident and a battleground state resident engaging in the particular behavior without including any of the explanatory mechanisms in the model. The columns for the other variables along the X-axis depict how much of the EC participatory gap is explained by the individual variable. This was determined by adding each of the variables to the regression model separately and assessing whether it was in fact a mediating variable that predicted the behavior of interest but was itself predicted by state competitiveness. In the case of political discussion, the columns represent the difference in the predicted probability of discussing politics every day



The second question is what explains the surge of contributing in safe states in 2004 that closed the gap identified in earlier elections? Were the donors responding to internal motivations, such as frustration, or external motivations, such as a concerted effort on the part of candidates to tap the financial resources of safe state residents? Preliminary analyses suggest that the surge in contributing occurred among politically knowledgeable partisans, but such people are the most likely to be frustrated *and* the most likely to be approached for donations. Thus, more research is required to determine what accounts for this surge.

The third graph examines causes for the EC participatory differences in political discussion in 1992 and 2004. Political interest is a crucial factor in both years, explaining approximately 24% of the difference in the former and 29% in the latter. Political knowledge also plays a role, albeit a smaller one, explaining approximately 17% of the difference in 1992 and 10% in 2004. In addition to these mechanisms, meeting attendance and being contacted during the campaign spurred residents of competitive states in 2004 to discuss politics more than residents of less competitive states. Meeting attendance accounted for approximately 14% of the gap, while being contacted accounted for over a third of it.

The final graph shows that higher levels of political interest and a greater likelihood of being mobilized during the campaign explains much of why battleground state residents were more likely to vote than their safe state counterparts in 1988 and 2004. Political interest explained 19% of the predicted probability gap in 1988 and 9% of it in 2004. Being contacted, however, explained a third of the difference in 1988 and 40% of it in 2004. Attending a meeting also played a small role in explaining the gaps.

This analysis reveals that most of the observed EC participatory gaps can be attributed to higher levels of political interest and mobilization in competitive states, especially in 1988 and 2004, suggesting, once again, that such disparities are a result of surging participation in battleground states rather than citizen withdrawal in safe states. Although this analysis may deprive EC critics of one argument for its eradication, it may point to a new one: that the enhanced political power of battleground state residents extends well beyond the increased value of their vote. The political clout of battleground state residents is compounded by the fact that they are more likely to be interested in the campaign, to be encouraged to participate, and to participate in a variety of ways. This only serves to amplify their disproportionate influence over the outcome of presidential elections.

Conclusion

The concern about the death of participatory politics in safe states is unfounded. If one sets aside 1992, which was an anomalous election due to the presence of a popular third party candidate, participation in safe states has been stable or even increasing. This does not mean that there is no evidence of EC participatory gaps emerging in presidential elections. The analysis reveals that they do occur, but that they are a result of a surge of activity among residents of battleground states, who have higher levels of political interest, are more likely to attend meetings, and—

most importantly—are more likely to be contacted during campaigns. The analysis also suggests that EC participatory gaps are more likely to occur when presidential elections are nationally competitive and involve campaigns that place a heavy emphasis on voter outreach. The latter findings are preliminary due to the small number of elections examined, but they do provide a foundation for future research.

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Appendix

Variable descriptions

Variable	Description
Education	Ranges from 0–3. Source: NES Cumulative File
Income	Ranges from 0–4. Source: NES Cumulative File
South	State was coded as “southern” if it officially seceded from the Union prior to the Civil War. Source: NES Cumulative File
Church attendance	Ranges from 0–4. Source: NES Cumulative File
Employed	Coded “1” if R employed at time of interview, “0” if not. Source: NES Cumulative File
Read newspaper	Ranges from 0–7. Source: NES Cumulative File
Watched television network news	Ranges from 0–7. Source: NES Cumulative File
Strength of partisanship	Ranges from 0–3. Source: NES Cumulative File
Interest	Created by rescaling the measures for “interest in the campaign” and “interest in politics” so that they had equal ranges and then averaging. Source: NES Cumulative File
Political knowledge	Ranges from 0–4. Used the interviewer’s rating of the respondent’s political knowledge. Source: NES Cumulative File
Contacts by party and groups	Ranges from 0–2. Source: NES Cumulative File
Registration	Ranges from 0–1. Source: NES Cumulative File
State competitiveness	Ranges from 0–4. Source: Shaw 2006
Turnout rate	Calculated using voting eligible population. Source: http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm
Average turnout in the 2 previous midterm elections	Calculated using voting eligible population. Source: http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm
Senate race	Dichotomous measure with “1” indicating that there was a Senate race in the state and “0” indicating that there was not

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