Is voting a habit?
An analysis of the effects of the Norwegian voting-age trial

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PRELIMINARY DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

It is often said that voter participation is a habit. If you take part in elections at a young age, you are likely to continue to be a voter later in life. We know from previous research that participation in one election is a good predictor of turnout in later elections. Clearly, some of the main sources of the predictive power of past turnout on present turnout are spurious effects. The sum of all the reasons why a voter chose to take part in one election may for the most part be the same in the next election. Previous studies, statistical or semi-experimental, have not been able to completely isolate the direct effect of previous participation on voting.

I use data from a trial in which the voting age was lowered from 18 to 16 in a group of Norwegian municipalities in the 2011 local elections. 16- and 17-year-olds in these municipalities where given the opportunity to take part in an election, while others at the same age could not. If voting is habit-forming, one would expect the 16- and 17-year olds who were given voting rights in 2011 have higher levels of turnout in the 2013 parliamentary election, than other voters at the same age. Panel data on turnout in both elections (from the electoral roll) is used to test this proposition.

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Introduction

Is the act of voting in elections habit-forming? Does one’s participation in one election increase the likelihood that one will vote in the next election? If so, a voter may enter into a "virtuous circle" of participation, in which voting will eventually become a habit.

Several previous studies have looked at this issue, and have tried to determine the extent to which participation in one election will by itself increase the likelihood that one will vote the next time around (Gerber et al 2003; Meredith 2009; Plutzer 2002). Uncovering such an effect, however, is challenging. Data on voter participation in consecutive elections may be hard enough to come by. When such data is available, the effect of participation in one election on turnout in a later election is quite strong (Plutzer 2002). This effect tends to remain after control for several variables that may be the source of specification error, such as educational level, political interest and the like (Green & Shachar 2000). It is impossible to be sure, however, if there is no remaining specification error in these types of models.

Experimental studies are therefore a natural alternative strategy (see e.g. Gerber et al 2003). The problem with those studies is that you cannot randomly assign values on your key independent variable (voting or non-voting in the first election). Most such studies use the results of a voter mobilization drive that had an effect on turnout in one election, to study long term effects (Cutts et. al. 2009; Davenport et. al. 2010; Gerber et. al. 2003). The significant long term effects found in some of these studies may therefore be the effects of the mobilization drive, rather than of the act of voting itself.

A third strategy used by Meredith (2009) is a regression discontinuity design that takes advantage of voting age restrictions in the US, and compares voters who turned 18 just before or just after the 2000 presidential election. There is a positive effect of eligibility in 2000 on later turnout, but the analysis may have been hampered by the lack of comparative data on the two groups.

I use data that stems from a trial that was held in a group of Norwegian municipalities in the local elections of 2011, in which the voting age was lowered from 18 to 16. In the trial municipalities, 16- and 17-year-olds were given the right to vote, while people at the same age in the rest of the country did not have the opportunity to vote. By studying turnout in the 2013 parliamentary election in the group of then 18- and 19-year-olds, I am able to measure the extent to which voting in one election has an effect on later participation. My hypothesis is that the
youth that were given voting rights in 2011 will have higher levels of turnout in the 2013-election, than those who have not had the opportunity to vote in any previous election.

A positive result indicates that voting in itself is habit-forming. Furthermore, we know that 16- and 17-year-olds tend to have high voter turnout (Bergh & Ødegård 2013; Zeglovits & Aichholzer 2014). If it can be shown that voting becomes a habit at this age, we can conclude that a lowering of the voting age to 16 is an effective means of increasing voter turnout in the long run.

I use data from the Norwegian electoral roll to test the hypothesis. The voter-level data includes information on turnout in both the 2011- and the 2013-elections.

The paper is structured as follows. I start by reviewing previous research in this field. The data-section describes the rather unique panel data that have been collected from the Norwegian electoral roll. In the results-section, I start by comparing turnout-rates between the 2011-trial-voters and other first time voters in 2013. I then aim to test whether the finding is generalizable by asking: could the result be explained by some unique characteristic of the Norwegian voting age trial? I conclude and sum up my findings in the final section.

**Previous Research**

There is a general consensus in the voter research literature that voting is habit-forming; once a person has become a voter, he or she is likely to continue voting later in life (Franklin 2004; Franklin et. al. 2004; Plutzer 2002). What is not entirely clear, however, is what causes this habit to develop. Much of the literature in this field suggests that it is the act of voting itself that is habit-forming (Gerber et al 2003). If you have voted once, you are, all else equal, more likely to do so again. Others suggest that there is more of a complex psychological process at work which over time can lead to a habit of voting (Plutzer 2002).

If the act of voting itself is habit-forming, researchers are faced with the problem of isolating the effect of past turnout on voting in later elections. Whatever reasons and motivations that a voter may have had for voting in one election will often be unchanged in the next election. The strong individual-level correlation between voting in two consecutive elections is therefore likely to be partially a spurious effect. So, how do you isolate the direct effect of voting in one election on turnout the next time around? Three different strategies have been employed in the literature to solve this problem.
The first strategy is to use panel data on voter turnout, i.e. data that measures voter turnout on two or more consecutive elections. Researchers then do a statistical analysis of the effect of voting in past elections on later turnout, using a large number of statistical controls. Green & Shachar (2000) use panel data from the US National Election Studies, and try several different groups of control variables. They find robust strong effects of past turnout on later voting in every model specification. They do acknowledge, however, that they cannot completely rule out "the possibility that some unmeasured variable accounts for over-time persistence in voting behavior" (564).

A second method for capturing the direct effect of past voting on participation later in life is experimental studies. There is a large and expanding research literature on voter turnout field experiments in the US (see e.g. Gerber & Green 2000; Gerber et al 2003; Murray & Matland 2013, Panagopoulos 2010). An abundance of experiments have been conducted, testing the effectiveness of various get-out-the-vote messages, and various modes of delivery of that message (e.g. telephone, emails, personal canvassing). Most of these studies look at short term effects on the upcoming election, but some also capture long term effects. For instance, Gerber et. al. (2003) use the results of an experiment in advance of the 1998 US general election, to look at turnout in local elections one year later (in November of 1999). They find a positive effect of the experimental treatment on turnout in 1998, and then estimate the effect of turnout in 1998 on voting in the 1999 local elections. The estimate indicates that there is a large effect of turnout in 1998, on voting in the next year’s election. Other studies have reported similar findings (Cutts et. al. 2009; Davenport et. al. 2010).

This research clearly shows that some get-out-the-vote efforts have an effect on voter turnout, and they may also have long-term effects on voting in subsequent elections. It is not evident, however, what the mechanism producing the long term effect is. Gerber et.al. conclude that it is the act of voting on one election that produces an effect in later elections. Davenport et al (2010) find that it is the social pressure imbedded in their experiment that produces the long term effect. The experiments conducted thus far cannot differentiate between, or directly measure, those two possible mechanisms. To do so, one would have to randomly assign voting or non-voting to people in one election, and measure the effect of that in the next election. Such an experiment has for obvious reasons not been carried out. As I will explain below, the Norwegian
voting age trial approximates an experiment of that sort, and can therefore be used to test the hypothesis that voting in itself is habit-forming.

Finally, the third approach used in the literature for identifying the direct effect of casting a ballot in one election on turnout later, is the regression discontinuity design used by Meredith (2009). He takes advantage of US voting age restrictions which hold that a voter has to be 18 years of age at the time of the election. People who turn 18 in the fall of the election year (2000), are separated into those that are eligible to vote (whose birthday is before Election Day), and those that are ineligible (who turn 18 after the election). Apart from differences in eligibility, the two groups are assumed to have similar characteristics. Using this semi-experimental design, Meredith (2009) measures the effect that eligibility in the 2000 presidential election has on turnout in the 2004-election, using data from the California Statewide Voter File. He finds that 2000-eligibility has a positive effect of about 4 percentage points on turnout in 2004. While this study is quite convincing, Meredith (2009) lacks data on eligible voters who are not registered. He uses statistics on births in California to construct a measure of turnout in the entire eligible population. This procedure may have affected the results.

There is, generally speaking, an overwhelming consensus in previous research that voting is habit-forming. Most of these studies conclude that the act of voting itself increases the likelihood that you will participate in elections in the future. That assertion can in most cases not be tested directly. Data from the Norwegian voting age trial provides the opportunity for more of a direct test than has been conducted in previous research.

**The 2011 Norwegian Voting Age Trial**

After several years of low and sometimes declining voter turnout among young voters in Norway, a growing concern has emerged in public opinion and among governing officials that a young generation of Norwegians is becoming disengaged from politics. One possible solution to this problem, according to some youth organizations and political parties in Norway, is to lower the voting age from 18\(^1\) to 16. Mark Franklin’s (2004) theory that a lowering of the voting age to 16 may have beneficial long terms effects on turnout, because that will instill a habit of voting in people at an early age, has been floated on several occasions in public debate on this issue.

\(^{1}\) You get the right to vote in Norway the year you turn 18.
Political support for a lowering of the voting age in Norway is limited to two small parties (the Liberal Party and the Socialist Left Party), so there is no short term prospect of change in voting age restrictions. Instead, the Norwegian government decided to hold a trial in which the voting age would be lowered to 16 in 20 selected municipalities and in the self-governed area of Longyearbyen in arctic Svalbard.

The selected municipalities are not a random sample. However, the government took pains to ensure that they were a fairly representative sample of Norway’s municipalities. All regions and counties of Norway are represented, there are large and small municipalities included, and the municipalities are diversified with respect to demographic characteristics, the political composition of the local council and the party adherence of the mayor. On the other hand, the government chose municipalities that had actively tried to get its youth involved in local society in various ways. On that score, these municipalities are not representative of the country as a whole.

The trial was held in the municipal elections of 2011. Voter turnout among 16- and 17-year olds were 58 percent; somewhat below the overall turnout-rate in these municipalities of 63 percent. However, 16- and 17-year olds voted in much higher numbers than other young people. For instance, only 46 percent of the age group 18 to 21 voted in the election (Bergh & Ødegård 2013).

Some municipalities put a large effort into getting 16- and 17-year olds to the polls, while others did not. This resulted in large disparities in turnout-rates between municipalities (Ødegård & Saglie 2013).

Data and Methods
The Norwegian voting age trial has most of the characteristics of a research experiment. One group, 16- and 17-year olds in the trial municipalities, was given the right to vote in 2011. A control group, 16- and 17-year olds in the rest of the country, did not have voting rights in the election that year. To the extent that we have identical types of data on the two groups, they can be used to test for effects that a lowering of the voting age may have. For instance, in Bergh

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2 The 20 municipalities were: Ålesund, Austevoll, Gjesdal, Grimstad, Hamar, Hammerfest, Kautokeino, Kåfjord, Luster, Lørenskog, Mandal, Marker, Namdalseid, Osen, Porsgrunn, Re, Sigdal, Stavanger, Tysfjord, and Vågå.
I test whether a lower voting age had an effect on the "political maturity" of 16- and 17-year-olds.

The aim in this paper is to test what effect the trial may have had on voter turnout in later elections; specifically in the Norwegian parliamentary election in September of 2013 (exactly two years after the 2011-elections).

The data used in this paper comes from the Norwegian electoral roll. In 2011, the Norwegian statistical agency Statistics Norway, collected data on turnout from the electoral roll from almost all of the trial voters aged 16 or 17; we have data from about 7000 of the 9000 eligible voters at that age. The data was collected using the principle that a sample of a 1000 young voters in each municipality was sufficient. All municipalities with the exception of Stavanger and Ålesund had less than 1000 trial voters (16- and 17-year olds). Hence, we have data on all eligible voters in this age group from 18 of the 20 municipalities, and a sample of 1000 from Stavanger and Ålesund. I use weights to compensate for what is in effect an underrepresentation of those two municipalities in our data.

In the 2013 parliamentary election, the trial voters from 2011 had reached the age at which one ordinarily become a first-time-voter in Norway: 18 or 19. After the 2013-election, information about voter turnout was again added to the data file, so that we now have measures of turnout in two consecutive elections.

To measure turnout in our control-group, i.e. first time voters in 2013 that were not part of the trial in 2011, we use a random sample of 9 608 eligible voters in Norway. The file covers all age groups, and was collected to study voter turnout generally. It includes information, from the electoral roll, about participation in both the 2011- and 2013-elections. When we exclude voters from the trial municipalities, we are left with a file of 8932 voters, 350 of which are aged 18 or 19.

The aim of this paper is to compare turnout rates between trial voters who got the right to vote in 2011 and ordinary first time voters in 2013. I then explore the generalizability of the finding by investigating whether three characteristics that are specific to the Norwegian voting age trial could explain the result: 1) the trial municipalities were in part selected because they had

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3 We measure age as your age on December 31. This corresponds to the voting age restrictions in Norway: turning 18 by the end of the election year. When voting age was lowered in the trial, those who turned 16 by the end of the election year got the right to vote.
4 Those aged 18 or 19 in 2013 who were not part of the 2011 voting age trial did not have voting rights in 2011. For that group we only have data on participation in 2013.
made an effort toward getting young people involved in politics and society. Could a higher level of political interest and engagement among young people in the trial municipalities explain the result? 2) There were unusual efforts made toward getting young people to the polls in the trial municipalities in 2011. Could these get-out-the-vote drives directed at young people in the trial municipalities account for the finding? 3) The trial involves a specific age group only. Can the result be used to draw a general conclusion about voting as a habit? I look at the extent to which voting in 2011 is correlated with a vote in 2013, and how that correlation varies by age groups.

Results

Turnout rates in the 2013 parliamentary election in the treatment group of 18- and 19-year olds who got voting rights in 2011, and in the control group of others at the same age, are in table 1. These rates are compared to the overall levels of electoral participation in the trial municipalities and in the rest of the country in 2013.

The results are surprising. Voter turnout in 2013 among 18- and 19-year olds who were given the right to vote in 2011 is lower than those in the same age group who are first time voters in 2013. This difference is statistically significant (p=.03). Furthermore, the difference is not due to an overall lower turnout rate in the trial municipalities. Turnout in the trial municipalities is only marginally lower than in the rest of the country. Controlling for that, the negative effect of being a trial voter (in 2011) on turnout in 2013 is 5.1 percentage points.

Table 1 Voter turnout among 18- and 19 year olds and in the whole electorate in the 2013 Norwegian parliamentary election, by participation in the 2011 voting age trial. Percent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>18- and 19 year olds</th>
<th>Electorate</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part of the 2011 voting age trial</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>-13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not part of the 2011 voting age trial</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>-8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-5.5</td>
<td>-0.4</td>
<td>-5.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N  
Part of the 2011 voting age trial  7168  
Not part of the 2011 voting age trial  350  

Given the results from previous research on voting as a habitual activity, there is every reason to expect the results in table 1 to be reverse. The fact that turnout is lower in the group of trial voters is remarkable. I cannot completely exclude the possibility that the negative finding is the result of sampling error in our control group, which has an N of 350. We have a robust measure of turnout among the trial voters.

I can, however, conclude with confidence that the 2011-trial did not have a positive effect on turnout in the 2013-election. There is no evidence to suggest that a habit of voting was instilled in the 16- and 17-year-olds who got voting rights in 2011.

The question, then, is: is this result generalizable? Can we conclude from the Norwegian trial that voting, by itself, is not habit-forming? In order to do so, one has to exclude the possibility that the result can be explained by some unique characteristics of the Norwegian voting age trial. The trial resembled an experiment, but it had some "flaws" that potentially could impact on the result. First, a criterion for including municipalities in the trial was that there had been an effort made to include young people in local politics and society for some time. In that sense the municipalities are not a random sample of Norway as a whole. Second, some municipalities initiated unusually active voter mobilization drives directed at young people, which could have affected that voting group in some way. Third, the trial only involves a specific age cohort. The result may therefore not be relevant to voters in general. I address these three issues in turn below.

Are the trial voters unusually interested and engaged in politics? The criterion used to select municipalities for the trial may lead one to suspect that the 16- and 17-year olds that took part in the 2011-election were not a random selection of that age group. If the local government had tried to involve young people in politics for some time even before the trial, that may have led to a higher level of political interest and involvement among young people there, than in the rest of the country. I find some evidence of that in Bergh (2013), but there is only a small difference between the trial municipalities and the rest of the country.

Had I found a positive result in table 1, i.e. higher turnout rates among the trial voters than among others; that could have been explained by a similar difference in political interest. One may argue that the data from the selected trial participants is biased toward finding a positive result. Given that the result is negative, one may argue that the selection criteria set by the
Norwegian government increases the robustness and generalizability of the finding. Hence, this is not an issue that cast serious doubt on the result.

What effect did the get-out-the-vote drives in the trial municipalities have?
The 20 municipalities involved in the 2011 voting age trial made varying efforts toward getting their youth to the polls on Election Day. Guro Ødegård and Jo Saglie (2013) have analyzed these efforts, and find that some municipalities, such as Stavanger and Marker, were successful in reaching out to their youth and getting them to the polls. Others, such as Ålesund and Kautokeino, did not manage to deploy their resources in an effective manner and were not as successful in voter mobilization.

Again, had the result in this paper been positive, i.e. higher turnout in 2013 among the trial voters, these voter mobilization efforts could potentially have explained the result. It seems less likely that the negative finding in table 1 is attributable to voter mobilization. However, it is conceivable that voter mobilization in 2011 could have had a backlash effect in 2013. Perhaps the 16- and 17-year-olds received immense encouragement to vote in 2011, and when they failed to get the same level of attention in 2013 some chose not to vote.

Since the get-out-the-vote efforts varied widely between the municipalities, I should be able to uncover effects of these efforts by looking at results by municipality. In table 2, I have split up the trial voters by which municipality they resided in, in 2011. Is the negative finding in table 1 attributable to specific municipalities?

The results in table 2 are fairly consistent between municipalities. The difference in turnout between 18- and 19-year-olds on the one hand, and the whole electorate on the other, are either at the same level as in the country as a whole, or greater. There is not a single example in table 2 of a "positive" effect, i.e. one in which the trial voters are more likely to vote in 2013 than voters at the same age outside of the trial municipalities. Hence, the general conclusion that the trial in 2011 did not have a habit-forming effect on these young voters, finds support.
Table 2 Voter turnout in the 2013-election among 18- and 19-year-olds generally, and by which trial municipality the voter resided in in 2011; compared to the electorate at large. Percent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>18- and 19 year olds</th>
<th>Electorate</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not part of the 2011 voting age trial</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>-8.2</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austevoll</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>-23.5</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ålesund</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>-15.9</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gjesdal</td>
<td>58.1</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>-20.9</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grimstad</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>-13.5</td>
<td>609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamar</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>-9.4</td>
<td>670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hammerfest</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>-16.9</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kautokeino</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>-20.0</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kåfjord</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>-13.4</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luster</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>-9.8</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lørenskog</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>-11.7</td>
<td>917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandal</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>-13.8</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marker</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>-17.1</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Namdalseid</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>-18.6</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osen</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>-27.2</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porsgrunn</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>-18.0</td>
<td>881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>-13.8</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sigdal</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>-19.2</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stavanger</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>-8.6</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tysfjord</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>-20.8</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vågå</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>-13.4</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, there is substantial variation between municipalities in table 2. If we exclude the smallest municipalities with less than a 100 voters at the age of 18 and 19 where random coincidences could affect the results, there are still substantial disparities. The municipality of Austevoll on the west coast has relatively low turnout among its young
population. The large town of Stavanger has turnout numbers that are similar to the rest of the country. I do not have exact measures of the voter mobilization efforts in different municipalities. What is clear, however, is that the "backlash hypothesis" does not find support. Stavanger had a successful voter mobilization program in 2011, which resulted in high turnout among young voters there. When we compare voters from Stavanger with those from other parts of the country, there is no evidence of a backlash in 2013. But, there is no evidence of a positive effect either.

**Is the result only relevant to young voters?**

The results thus far establish plainly that the 2011 voting age trial did not have a positive effect on turnout in the 2013 election. Since those who took part in the trial in 2011 are no more likely to vote in 2013 than others (perhaps even less likely), it seems improbable that the trial will have a positive long term effect. Any such effect should have been measurable two years after the trial. Hence, the results in this paper indicate that a voting age of 16 will not have a positive effect on turnout in the long run.

What then, about the more general question in this paper: is voting a habit? The evidence regarding young voters suggests that the answer is "no": participation in one election does not have an effect on later turnout. Is that result unique to young voters, or can it be generalized to voters overall? It is conceivable that the habit of voting does not start to form until after the age of 18 and 19. Obviously, I do not have comparable data on older voters, but our data does enable an exploration of the issue of voting as a habit in different age groups.

Both data-files used in this paper, one that covers 18- and 19-year-olds that were included in the 2011 voting age trial and one that is a random sample of all voters in the country, includes individual-level information about voting in both 2011 and 2013. I can therefore look at the effect that a vote in 2011 had on the likelihood that you would also vote in 2013. These effects can be split up by age. If voting only becomes a habit later in life, I would expect the effect of a 2011 vote on 2013-turnout to increase with age. Differences in turnout in 2013 between voters and non-voters from 2011, split up by age, are in table 3.
Table 3 Turnout in the 2013 parliamentary election, by participation in the 2011 local elections, in different age groups. Percent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Voted in 2011</th>
<th>Did not vote in 2011</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>N – voted</th>
<th>N – did not vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 - 19*</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>5429</td>
<td>3956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 - 21</td>
<td>78.6</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 - 25</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 - 29</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 - 39</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>860</td>
<td>577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 - 49</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>1208</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 - 59</td>
<td>93.1</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>1149</td>
<td>442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 - 79</td>
<td>95.3</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>1776</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All voters</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>6072</td>
<td>3519</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Voters that were part of the 2011 voting age trial

The effect of having voted in 2011 on turnout in 2013 is 37.6 percentage points among all voters, and 35.9 percentage points among 18- and 19-year-olds. There are substantial differences between age groups in actual turnout, but not in the effect that past turnout has on later turnout. This effect is strong and statistically significant in all age groups.

I have found that there is no direct effect of 2011-turnout on voting in 2013 in the youngest age-cohort in table 3. The total effect of 35.9 in that age group must therefore in its entirety be the result of spuriousness. For other age groups, we can only measure the total effect, and that does not vary in any substantial way across age cohorts. Presumably, if a direct habit-forming effect of part turnout developed in older age groups, we would have seen an increase in the total effect by age. Hence, it does not seem likely that there is such a direct effect in any age group. The evidence suggests that there is no habit-forming effect of voting in older age-cohorts either.

Conclusion
The question posed in the title of this paper is: Is voting a habit? Data from the 2011 voting age trial and the subsequent 2013 parliamentary election provides a unique opportunity to answer that question. The short answer is "no"; I find no evidence that voting is habit-forming.
Previous research has used various methods for uncovering the extent to which voting is a form of habitual behavior (Gerber et al 2003; Meredith 2009; Plutzer 2002). First, regression analyses of panel data, using an extensive selection of control variables, have indicated that voting in one election has a direct positive effect on turnout in later elections (see e.g. Green & Shachar 2000). Second, data from experiments looking at get-out-the-vote drives, mostly in the US, seem to show that voting can be habit-forming (see e.g. Gerber et. al. 2003). Third, using a regression discontinuity design, Meredith (2009) finds a positive effect of turnout in one California election, on later participation. The general conclusion from this research is that voting is in itself habit-forming; someone who took part in one election will, all else equal, be more likely to vote the next time around than someone who did not vote in the first election.

However, there is no guarantee in either of these studies that the effect of participation the first time around is completely isolated. There is a remaining possibility that spuriousness explain the correlations between participation in consecutive elections.

The Norwegian voting age trial approximates an experiment in which some young people at the age of 16 or 17 were given the right to vote in 2011, while others at the same age were not. Data from that trial and from the following 2013 parliamentary election is therefore ideal for testing the hypothesis that there is a direct effect of voting in one election on turnout the next time around. The results in this paper are clear: there is no evidence of such a habit-forming effect. If voting in one election does not directly affect a vote two years later, there is no reason to believe that voting will become a habit in the long run. People vote because they choose to do so, not because it is a habit.
References


