

***How does Proportional Representation Boost
Turnout? A Political Knowledge-based Explanation.***

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INTRODUCTION

It is a commonplace fact that more politically knowledgeable citizens are more likely to vote.ⁱ It has also been established that, at least as far as Western democracies are concerned, a higher proportion of citizens vote under proportional (PR) electoral systems.ⁱⁱ This paper seeks to show that these two seemingly unrelated facts are in fact connected.

An institutional logic underlying this relationship has been identified by Franklin (1996) in his analysis of turnout variations in elections to the European Parliament. He argues that turnout is related to the voters' awareness of the consequences of their decisions. Hence the more institutions simplify the relationship between citizens' actions and political outcomes, the better the chances of bringing them to the polls. This logic suggests that other things being equal, unitary, unicameral, parliamentary systems can have such an effect in that they lower the cost of political knowledge at the margin.

While it is a quite straightforward proposition as to why unitary, unicameral, and parliamentary institutions are simpler from the citizen's point of view than federal, bicameral or mixed systems, the same is not true of Proportional Representation (PR) electoral systems, which are usually more complicated than most non-proportional systems, especially first-past-the-post or single-member plurality systems (SMP) used in Britain, Canada, and the United States. In this paper I shall argue that this apparent complexity belies the reality that, from the citizen's point of view, PR simplifies the relationship between their actions and political outcomes, and thus lowers the cost of political knowledge at the margin. Because it thus raises voters' awareness of the consequences of their decisions, it boosts voter turnout.

This is not the place to enter into the intricacies of the various electoral systems. Suffice it to say that PR institutions are those closer to an ideal type in which all political representation, from the national legislature to local school boards, reflects the popular support for each competing position or party. As a shorthand, thus, we can use the proportionality of seats to votes in the legislature as indicator of the presence of PR.

As far as comparing levels of political knowledge or political sophistication is concerned, we are able to take advantage of a fair amount of recent research identifying relevant factors and indicators. One general understanding is that political knowledge is something more than merely an individual attribute. As Gordon and Segura (1997:129) put it: "Measures of political sophistication ...

are really products of both capabilities and decisions.... Lack of sophistication need not indicate an inherent weakness of mass publics; this shortcoming may, instead, be a product of the systems - and the individual choices structured by those systems - within which it emerges.”

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND VOTERS’ POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Yet the political dimension of the relationship between turnout and electoral systems remains largely unexplored. One important exception is found in an article by Fisher et al (2008) which tested the hypothesis that electoral systems’ effects varied with the level of political knowledge of citizens and that this could account for the fact that turnout tends to be higher under systems of non-plurality (primarily PR), than plurality. Table 1 below set out their findings using standardized individual political knowledge data from the responses to the CSES’ political knowledge questions. (Note that the CSES questionnaire used at the time left it up to each participant to select the political knowledge questions, stipulating that their content be chosen to try to have them answered correctly by roughly 2/3, 1/3, and 1/2 of respondents respectively.ⁱⁱⁱ As is quite clear from the table, the overall turnout lead of countries with proportional systems is due almost entirely to the significantly higher rates among those with lower levels of political knowledge.

Table 1

Standardized Knowledge	Electoral System	
	Non-Plurality	Plurality
	<u>Per cent Voting</u>	
Less than -1	54	38
-1 to 0	67	54
0 to 1	72	68
More than 1	81	78
Overall	68	60
(N)	(58900)	(14390)

The authors were apparently surprised at the clear relationship that they found; indeed, the way the arguments are presented suggests that they were expecting the opposite relationship due to the relative lack of complexity of the plurality system. They sought valiantly, but ultimately

fruitlessly, to explain their unexpected findings.

“Why are those with low levels of knowledge particularly discouraged from voting under plurality rule. Our efforts to unravel this puzzle have been less successful. District marginality, which is uniquely relevant in plurality systems, has only a weak effect on turnout, and in any event it is those who are most knowledgeable who are most affected. Voters report greater contact with elected politicians in plurality elections, not less. Satisfaction with democracy and feelings of efficacy do increase turnout, but they are not particularly low in plurality systems, either amongst the electorate in general or amongst those with less knowledge in particular. Party systems are less polarized in plurality systems while those with less political knowledge are less likely to see a large difference between the political parties. But as the relationship between knowledge and relative strength of preference between parties is the same in plurality systems as elsewhere, the lower polarization between parties in plurality systems does not account for the stronger relationship between knowledge and turnout.”

Looking at the comparative political-knowledge literature, we find outcomes of a number of tests to have been administered in various countries in recent years that are consistent with these findings. For example, in the National Geographic-Roper survey of nine mature democracies, young people in the three with Single-Member Plurality electoral systems, the United States, Canada and the UK, scored lowest, while the two PR countries, Sweden and Germany, ranked at the top in geopolitical knowledge. In-between were the countries with mixed systems, Italy and Japan, as well as France with its second ballot system. More closely linked to turnout are the results of an International IDEA (1999: 30) study. In examining differences in turnout level for voters between 18 and 29 years of age in 15 Western European countries in the latter 1990s, IDEA estimated that in countries using PR systems the average youth turnout rate was almost 12 percentage points higher than in non-PR countries.^{iv} The usual explanation is that offered by IDEA, namely that PR systems facilitate access to parliamentary representation for small parties. However, this turns out not to be the case.^v Something other than number of parties drives this relationship.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND THE EFFECT OF EDUCATION ON POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Turning directly to this relationship, we have noted that we lack the data for directly testing this assertion comparatively using a single cross-national indicator of political knowledge. Nevertheless, it is possible to use the

responses to the CSES' political knowledge questions in such a way as to bring aggregate, cross-national data into the discussion. Kimmo Grönlund and this author (2006) found a higher correlation between the level of education attained and political knowledge in the majoritarian CSES countries than in the PR ones. The findings of this study begin to unravel the puzzle that Fisher et al. were left with.

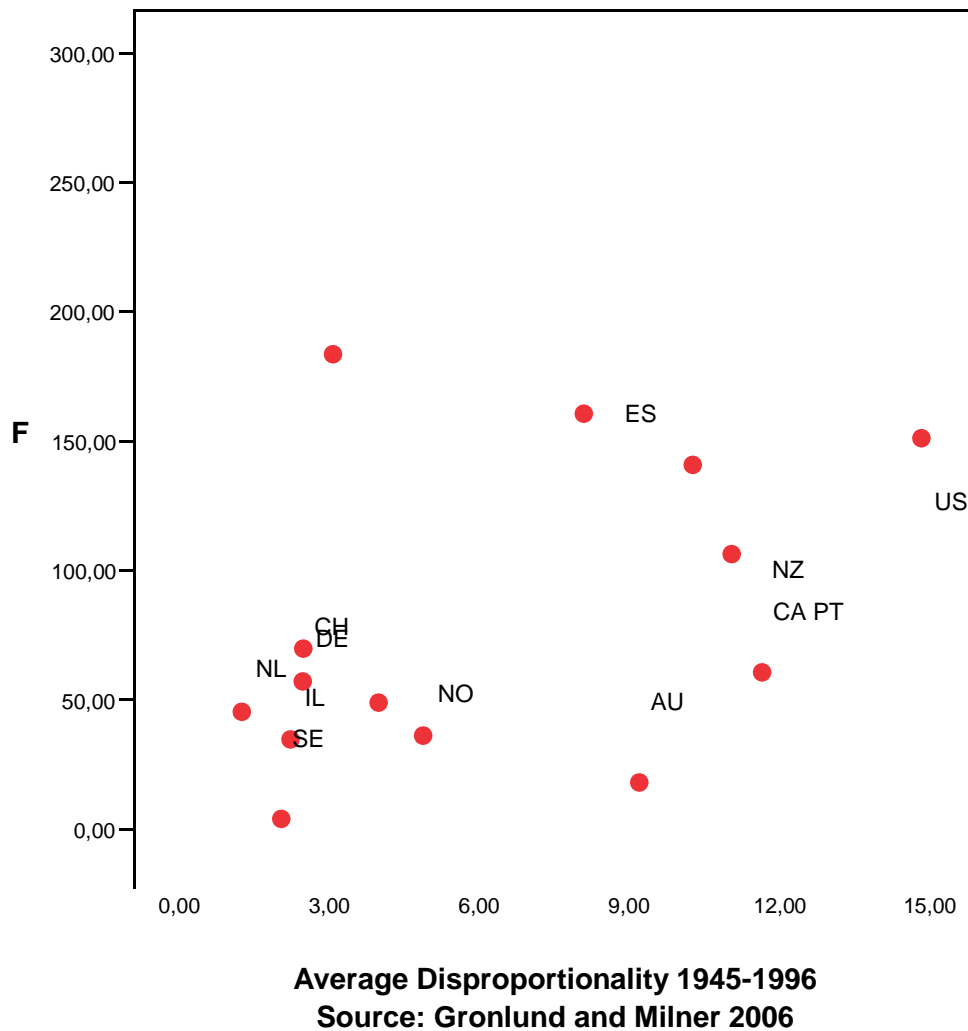
The method used was to quantify the dispersion of political knowledge among educational categories by calculating the variation from the mean for each CSES country of the average political knowledge score in the group with the lowest level of education. Average dispersion was found to be significantly lower in countries using PR, thus suggesting that PR reduces the threshold of political knowledge required to make an informed vote, hence boosting in particular the likelihood of voting among those for whom the cost is highest, i.e. those lacking in educational resources.

Using a dichotomous measure, we found that in the PR countries the average correlation of number of correct answers with level of education attained ($r = 0.26$, (compared to 0.33 for the rest.) To further test this relationship we placed countries' electoral institutions on a continuum based not on institutions but on outcomes, i.e. how close to proportionality was the number of seats won by parties compared to the vote they received. Figure 1 reproduces a chart using as one indicator that derived from Lijphart's (1999:162) application of the Gallagher Index of Disproportionality to democratic general elections from 1945-1996, and the dispersion of political knowledge among educational categories rate (F score) on the other.

There is a reasonably strong linear association in Figure 1, which, when the clear outlier Belgium (unlabeled) is excluded, becomes highly significant ($r = .62$). (The data for Belgium is an amalgam of the results for Flanders with the highest dispersal rates – something meriting investigation in itself - and Wallonie, with rates between those of the US and Spain.) As expected, thus, as outcomes become more proportional to the popular support attained by political parties, political knowledge becomes less dependent on formal education.

Figure 1

THE EFFECTIVE NUMBER OF PARTIES SCATTERED AGAINST THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF EDUCATION ON POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE.



IN SEARCH OF AN EXPLANATION

The above chart and table are derived from two studies using quite different methodologies that point to a single phenomenon. Yet, it is a phenomenon that has yet to be adequately explained. Fisher et al. seek out possible negative effects of plurality systems on the turnout of those with low levels of knowledge, limiting their search to institutional aspects: district marginality, voter contact with elected politicians, fewer parties, and lower polarization between parties. They do not focus on factors that directly relate the workings of electoral system to the

knowledge required to vote. Hence, absent so far is an investigation into how political knowledge is communicated – or not communicated – via political institutions generally, and electoral systems in particular. The rest of this essay explores this relationship along two dimensions: the historical and the geographical.

Though it does not take the electoral system into consideration, there is a literature that points us in the direction of the explanation we are looking for, namely one focusing on the “ideological reputation of parties: in particular, their ideological coherence and historical consistency” (Merolla et al, 2014). Among others, the authors cite Brader and Tucker (2012), who find that party labels are more effective in older, more stable systems, and Lau et al. (2013) who find that “ideological distinctiveness” of the parties increases citizens’ ability to cast a correct vote. Simply put, the claim here is that over time and place, proportional systems contribute to such ideological consistency and distinctiveness. The argument can be summarized in eight points:

1. There is a political knowledge/information threshold below which, under normal circumstances, voting – unless obligatory - is likely to be eschewed.
2. Other things being equal: the easier for the citizen to understand the relationship between the electoral choices made and their outcomes in representation, the lower the information threshold.
3. Citizens (can) participate in many elections at different times (the historical dimension) and at different levels (the territorial dimension), both of which affect how they are able to understand the relationship between the electoral choices made and their outcomes in a given election.
4. As a general rule, the more consistent the features (parties, leaders, rules...) of elections over the two dimensions, the lower the information threshold for a given election.
5. Proportional systems are generally more consistent over the two dimensions (time and space) than plurality systems.
6. Hence, PR tends to favour stable party identification.
7. As such, PR elections lower the threshold, reducing the costs of political knowledge, especially for those for whom it is at a premium
8. Over time, thus, use of a proportional system of elections – as opposed to a non-proportional system - can be expected to have a positive effect on turnout.

Party Identification and Political Knowledge

Let us look at these relationships in detail. Given that there are fewer parties, and a reasonable possibility of a single-party government, it is often assumed that under SMP, the most common form of non-proportional electoral systems, voting is a simpler proposition: a choice cast as between keeping the bums in or kicking them out, one would expect lowers the political information threshold for voters. In contrast, the greater number of parties and candidates, and the likelihood of shared power under PR would be assumed to have the opposite effect. But such thinking treats the voters as living only in the present. Citizens bring to the decision whether or not to vote not only current information, but also accumulated experience.^{vi}

The most useful empirical expression of this experience for our purposes is party (or partisan) identification. While the relationship between party identification and voting is well established, the relationship between party identification and political knowledge is uncertain. The work of Russell Dalton in particular suggests that a more “cognitively mobilized” (more knowledgeable, better educated, and more exposed to news media) citizenry is less prone to identify with a party. The argument presented here is based on the claim that this is not the case, a claim confirmed by recent research. A study by Albright (2009) concluded that the opposite is more frequently the case.

Albright brings to bear data from several comparative studies linking cognitive mobilization and party identification. Albright’s main finding dramatically show that in virtually every modern democracy the most politically engaged are the least likely to alter their party identification. Moreover, Albright’s data allows us to compare plurality and non-plurality countries, though given the differences in operationalization, we cannot simply substitute cognitive mobilization for political knowledge.

Without, thus, pushing it any further than justified, Albright’s charts (see Appendix) suggest an intriguing relationship consistent with our analysis. Albright’s main finding, that the most politically engaged are the most likely to identify with a party applies cross-nationally irrespective of the electoral system used. But his data breaks down the respondents by age groups. If we focus only on (the lines designating) the older groups, i.e., those participating long enough to form over time a stable political map conducive to party identification, a second relationship becomes visible in the charts. As a general rule, in the less proportional countries, especially when compared to younger groups, those age groups with long years of opportunity to vote tend to show either lower levels of party identification at the lower levels of cognitive mobilization, or a greater difference in party identification between high and low levels of cognitive mobilization, or both.

The Historical Dimension

The explanation for the above identified relationship lies in the fact that identifying with a particular party is almost by definition a longitudinal attribute. As such, it is fostered by party and party-system stability which promotes, as noted above, ideological consistency and distinctiveness. But such stability is more fragile under plurality systems. Under PR there is far less incentive for parties to react to election results by making precipitous changes to their program and ideological stance, that is, those elements that locate them on the voters' political map. Parties that frequently change their public image, via their platforms and leaders, in an effort to shore-up short-term support are more likely to lose than gain long-term adherents. But plurality electoral systems drive parties to do just this, since such systems widen the gap between winners and losers in number of seats since they tend to blow up a party's strength when it does well, and shrivel it when it does poorly. In contrast, under PR the voters are more likely to be able to count on a relatively clearly drawn and stable political map on which to plot their own paths.

This tendency is compounded by the logic that operates at the level of the electoral district. Single member districts overvalue the choices of the least partisan citizens, those who can make the difference between winning and losing marginal seats, at the expense of party identifiers. Moreover, the normal, everyday activities of the local MP contradict the basic message of the party. Over time, more and more voters loosen their ties to the political party which purports to be "everybody's instrument." In contrast, under PR, legislators elected on a proportional basis in a multi-member district are less prone to lose sight of the fact that it is the party that primarily links them to the electorate.

In terms of campaign strategy, under plurality systems, with so much depending on so few votes, there is a strong tendency for politics to become a ruthless zero-sum game -- you lose; I win -- creating an incentive for distorting the opponent's position (through appeals to emotion, negative advertising and the like), while keeping one's own policies as vague as possible. The result, whatever the intentions of the actors involved, is a public less informed than it needs to be.^{vii} In contrast, under PR, the voters are more likely to be able to count on a relatively clearly drawn and stable political map on which to plot their own paths.

Hence the frequent ideological shifts of parties in the Westminster democracies in an effort to at least appear to keep up with shifting public opinion, compared to the more gradual evolution under PR in Europe. A case in point emerges from British political experience. To defeat Thatcherism, Tony Blair pushed Labour firmly to the centre, creating "New Labour." Yet the powerful Conservative

majority he overcame was in fact an artefact of the electoral system, highly vulnerable to defeat by a Labour-Liberal Democratic coalition had the elections been fought under PR. A “Lib-Lab” government would have enacted centre-left policies similar to those of New Labour. But there is a profound difference between Blairite policies emerging as a compromise program of government between parties of the centre and left rather than from a party transformed almost beyond recognition. In the former case, normal under PR, a formal or informal coalition government implements a compromise program reflecting the expressed choices of a majority of voters, but constituent parties still retain basic programs reflecting the expectations of party supporters as they have evolved over time.^{viii}

The transformation of Labour into New Labour ripped up the political map, changing the settings on many citizens’ political compass. Especially in the context of an SMP environment in which parties concentrate mobilization efforts – including providing information – on voters in marginal districts, such a transformation made it all the harder for the average citizen to effectively apply to current choices the distinctions drawn from past experience. For those at the margins of political knowledge, this can raise the threshold, i.e. magnify the gap between having and lacking the minimal knowledge needed to cast a meaningful vote.

The Geographical Dimension

Elections take place not only over time but also at different levels. The same logic applies to this special or geographical dimension. In PR systems, it is almost universal that parties operate at more than one level. This is less frequently the case in plurality systems, under which parties face a disincentive from risking operating at levels other than the one at which they are best organized, or at which the stakes are highest. On a cost-benefit basis, parties are reluctant to invest resources to compete in elections to assemblies and councils in regions and municipalities where they are weak. Canada is a clear example of this. Over time, thus, the tendency for national parties is to be increasingly absent from local politics^{ix} – as we have seen in the United States where parties were traditionally present. Over three-quarters of municipalities currently use non-partisan elections to select their public officials (Shaffner and Streb, 2000: 2).

Where national parties are partially or fully absent from lower level political activity, vertical political links are weak and vertical communication flows disrupted. Citizens find themselves with a political map from which roads that connect the small communities to the main centres have been washed out. The extreme case is Canada where municipal political parties – where they exist at all – have no formal and few informal links to the parties operating at the

federal and provincial levels. The opposite logic operates under PR. In the case of Norway, for example, once PR was adopted for the national legislature, its use spread to other levels to become embedded in a system of vertically integrated relationships centered on the political parties.^x In Sweden, the introduction of PR led the Social Democrats to become active in municipal politics and then rural communes, which forced their "bourgeois" opponents to do likewise - a process completed with the municipal amalgamation reforms of 1974.^{xi}

Of course, the electoral system is not the only factor explaining the presence of national political parties in local elections – as we can see in the case of the UK, where local elections serve largely as a kind of nation-wide poll on the national parties. Nevertheless, as a rule, the closer the institutional fit between the levels, similar PR electoral systems, but also congruent constituency boundaries, etc., the greater the chances of vertical continuity, the clearer the political map.

Conclusion

To summarize: because PR systems are more conducive to the formation and durability of programmatically coherent parties that contest elections throughout the country and at more than one level, they provide potential voters with a political map that is relatively clearly drawn and stable across time and space. They make it easier for the potential voters to locate themselves politically, i.e. to identify with a party and to use that identification as a guide through the complexities of issues and actors over time and at various levels of political activity. In this way PR fosters political knowledge and thus, potentially, electoral participation, especially at the lower end of the education ladders, where information about issues and actors is at a premium. Put otherwise, the logic that PR elections favour informed participation by reducing the costs of political knowledge for those for whom it is at a premium. Hence we should not be surprised that overall turnout is higher under PR.

A Caveat

This is not to say that adopting PR can be counted on to reverse declining turnout. In New Zealand, which adopted MMP in 1996, we observe a kind of spike, pushing turnout upward by about 3 percent in 1996, only to see the decline that marked the 1980s resume in 1999. In Scotland, the turnout of voters casting ballots in PR elections for the new Assembly fell sharply in its second election in 2003 (to 49.4 from the 58.8 percent recorded in 1999). In the London mayoral election the percentage of registered voters turning out in 2000, 34.7 percent, was identical to that that took part in the previous borough elections (Electoral Commission 2002: 23). In our study of Switzerland, the only

country without compulsory elections that uses a variety of electoral systems in local elections, Andreas Ladner and I found that though PR municipalities had higher turnout to begin with, they were no better at withstanding the turnout decline experienced at all levels in Swiss elections in the 1990s (Ladner and Milner, 1999; Milner and Ladner, 1996).

In considering such cases, we should keep in mind that proportionality is far from fully institutionally rooted in all of these countries. Scotland, which operates in the context of Westminster's dominating SMP environment, has only recently introduced semi-proportional STV to local elections. In New Zealand, PR has only been applied in fits-and-starts to local elections.^{xii} Hence we are far from attaining the political knowledge effects from a simplification of the political map that a full-fledged, multi-level, PR institutional environment would bring.

In the United States Barack Obama, who put "change" on the American political agenda, did not see fit to include political institutions as a dimension of the change required, since, presumably, he realized that even he could not raise the political capital needed to reform the American electoral system. With the US excluded, there are not that many post-industrial democracies apart from Canada^{xiii} that do not use a form of PR and are in a position to benefit from it. Australia has resolved the turnout – though not the political attentiveness - problem through compulsory voting. In the United Kingdom in recent years, with different variations of proportional and mixed electoral systems have been implemented in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the city of London. However, there appears to be no possibility of the UK as a whole moving in this direction.

APPENDIX

(Note that both cognitive mobilization and the probability of party identification are operationalized somewhat differently in the Political Action and ECPR data.)

J.J. Albright / Electoral Studies 28 (2009) 248–260

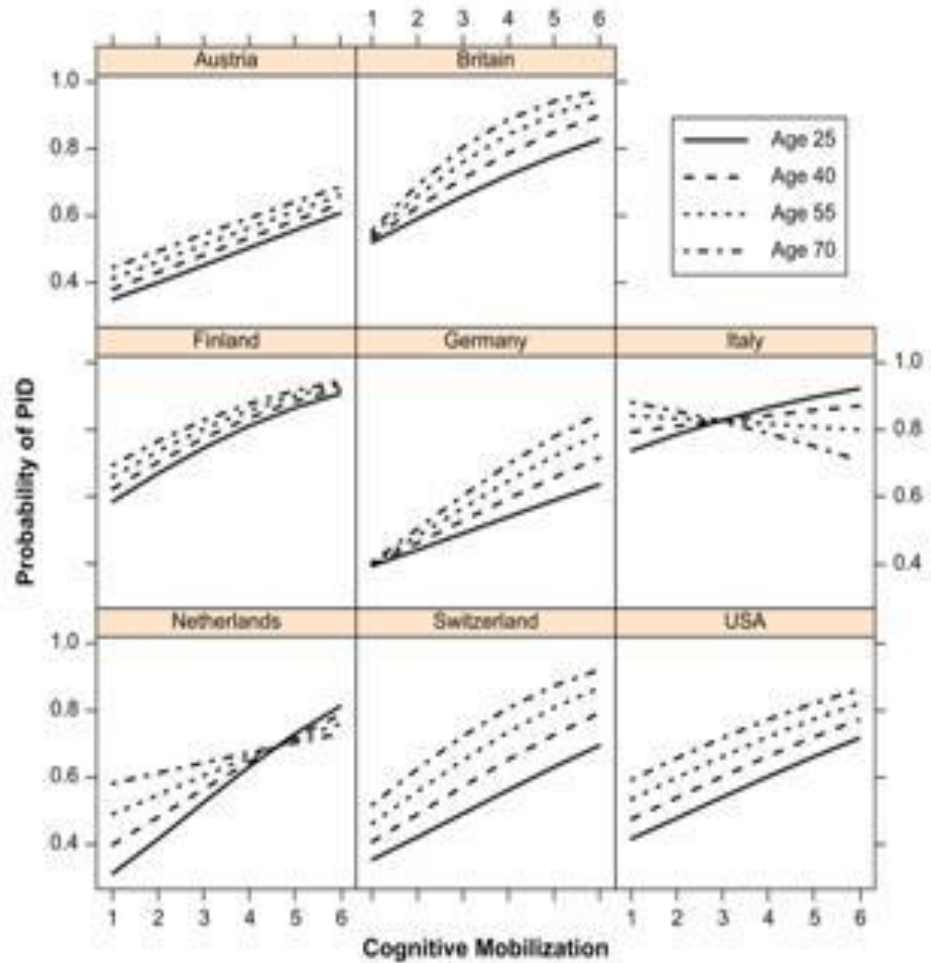


Fig. 2. Predicted probability of party identification by cognitive mobilization: Political Action data.

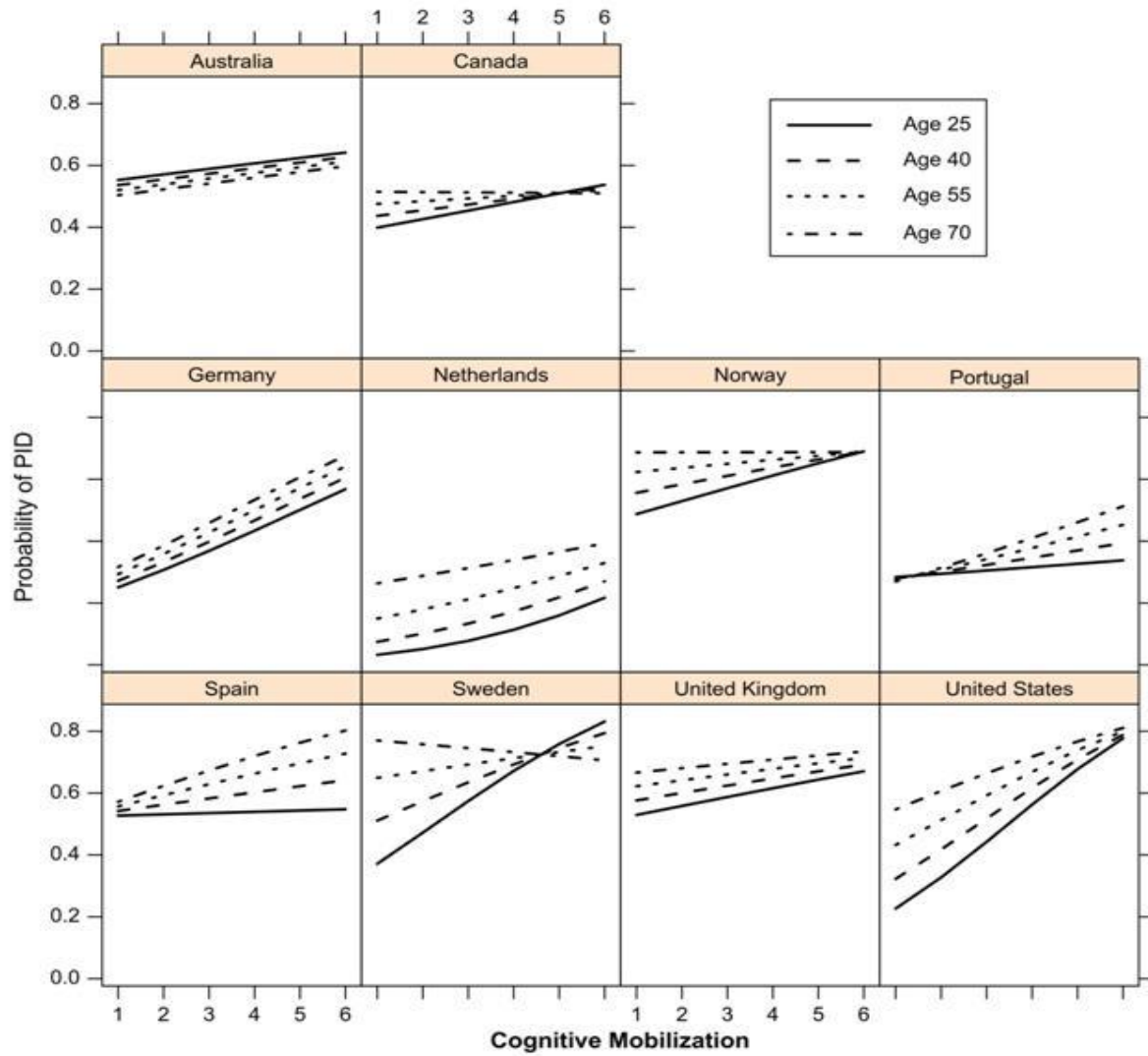


Fig. 4. Predicted probability of party identification by cognitive mobilization: CSES data.

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NOTES

- ⁱⁱ For example, Farrell (2001) compiled data for turnout for 39 democracies where voting is not compulsory in the last election before the year 2000, finding turnout averaged 68.2 percent in non-proportional systems compared to 70.8 percent in proportional systems. Others have found a greater disparity. Estimates based on earlier data were higher. For Lijphart (1997) it was about nine percent, a difference similar to that found by the International IDEA in its report "Voter Turnout from 1945-1997" using voting age populations rather than registered voters.
- ⁱⁱⁱ It is only with the ongoing fourth wave that the CSES, after much deliberation, introduced a standard set of four factual political knowledge questions, the responses to which will be incorporated in future research by this author.
- ^{iv} A similar result had been attained in an earlier such test reported on in *National Geographic* which was not limited to young people. In that study (December 1989, 816–18), Sweden came in first, with 11.6 average right answers; Germany, Japan, France, and Canada followed with, 11.2, 9.6, 9.3, and 9.2, respectively; and then came the United States and the United Kingdom, with 8.6 and 8.5. The only major change was the significant improvement of Italy, from eighth to third place.
- ^v Blais (2006) in his review essay on voter turnout, calls attention to an apparent puzzle about the link between electoral systems and turnout, namely that, while PR systems with many parties appear to have higher turnout than single-member district plurality systems with few parties, yet turnout does not increase with the (effective) number of parties.
- ^{vi} This is a reason I am skeptical of efforts to replicate the voting experience in laboratories, (especially when the participants are students who have, at best, voted only once) particularly when voting for non-existent political parties. Such experiments lack external validity since most voters in the real world bring to the ballot box baggage from previous electoral experiences.
- ^{vii} A study comparing the political marketing strategies of parties in the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, found that the latter differed from the others in that the larger parties avoided negative advertising targeting the small parties, since they knew they might need their support in forming governments (From a talk by Jennifer Lees-Marshment from the University of Auckland, entitled "Political Marketing and Democracy," June 3, 2009, McGill University.)
- ^{viii} This, I suggest, in part explains the dramatic decline in democratic participation in Britain (turnout in 2001 was 18 percentage points lower than in 1992).

^{ix} I found a significantly larger gap in the countries in which national parties play little or no role in local politics, such as the United States, Canada and New Zealand, than in the European countries where they are very much involved (see Milner 2002, Chapter 5).

^x One indicator of this difference can be found in career patterns. As noted in the classic study by Eldersveld and his colleagues from interviews of 250 to 400 local leaders in 15 to 20 comparable municipalities in the majoritarian United States as well as consensual Sweden and the Netherlands in the latter 1980s, concluding that “there is a strong vertical structuring of the party relationships in Europe among policy leaders, from the bottom to the top of the system...” Eldersveld et al continue: “In both European systems local elites have much more contact with national administrators than US elites do.... European leaders are also more in touch with party leaders at the local and the national levels. In Europe, for example, over 80 per cent of local councilors report that they initiate contacts with the local party organizations (93 percent in Sweden, 83 percent in the Netherlands, compared to 27 percent in the US).

^{xi} Moreover, in comparing differences between average national turnout and average local turnout under SMP and PR, I found a significantly larger gap in the countries in which national parties play little or no role in local politics, such as the United States, Canada and New Zealand, than in the European countries where they are very much involved (see Milner 2002, Chapter 5).

^{xii} A law allows local authorities to run elections under STV as well as SMP. For the 2004 municipal elections, only 10 chose the former. (See http://www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/wpg_URL/Resource-material-STV-Information-Index?OpenDocument#four)

^{xiii} In Canada several provinces were not long ago on the verge of adopting PR, and the issue has been discussed at the federal level in recent decades. Given the significant drop in turnout, it is quite possible that had PR elections been introduced federally in time to be used during the period of uncompetitive elections from 1993 to 2004, the effect could have been perceptible over the long term by developing the habit of voting among a meaningfully greater proportion of young people than turned out to be the case. However, this was never in the cards.