Workshop proposal – ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Uppsala 2004
“Low turnout, does it matter?”

Directors

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Abstract

Whenever turnout is low in an election or referenda, political commentators complain about the lack of citizens involvement and sense of duty in democracy. However although it is normally taken for granted that low turnout is a problem, it is not always made clear why low turnout should be a major concern. The focus of the workshop will be why low turnout could matter – or why not.

The individual and institutional reasons why citizens get involved into politics and determinants of participation is an area which has been widely researched. However, possible consequences of low turnout have been discussed more often from a normative perspective by scholars of democratic theory than by students of electoral behaviour. The aim of this workshop is to go beyond explaining participation and to establish explanations and the extent to which low turnout is a threat to democracy, linking theoretical debates with empirical research.

We can find low and declining turnout in elections in many democracies and in local elections or elections for the European Parliament turnout is almost always even lower than in the national election of a country. In addition we can find low turnout levels in referenda, such as in Italy, Switzerland or Ireland.

However, the key point for the workshop is not how many vote, and why, but how and why it matters. The workshop welcomes papers that discuss effects of low voter turnout empirically or theoretically or do both. Papers are welcomed which explore different possible consequences of low turnout e.g. whether it has an (indirect) influence that certain policies in favour of voters are preferred by political elites to policies that would be more in favour of non-voters, whether campaigns change due to low turnout, whether low turnout has a (direct) effect on the outcome of elections and/or popular votes, papers that discuss reasons for non-voting and its consequences and more theoretical papers about implication of non-voting on the quality of democracy.
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Outline

The ideal of democracy is one of active, integrated citizens who participate in different aspects of the political life. These citizens are attached to democratic values, get informed and talk about politics, then make their mind up and cast their votes on a voting day. However we know that citizens in western democracies have always been very far from this ideal. Many people do not care a lot about politics; they don’t make the effort to get well informed about political issues and at the end they often fail to vote.

We can find low or declining voter turnout in many countries (Gray and Caul 2000, Franklin, Lyons and Marsh 2000, Franklin 2002). Turnout is especially low in some national elections as in the US or in Switzerland but turnout is rather low also in “second-order” elections such as local elections in many countries or in the elections to the European Parliament. In addition we find low turnout in many popular votes in countries like Switzerland, Italy or Ireland.

The individual and institutional elements that explain participation on an individual or aggregated level are very well known. Commonly participation is lower amongst those of lower class, less education and those who are relatively young. People with less social and political involvement e.g. through trade union membership, partisan attachment or religious attendance, and those less politically informed people also tend to participate less. On the aggregate level we find, that compulsory voting, PR elections or facilitating effects such as weekend voting or postal voting tend to increase turnout (see e.g. Franklin 2002, Oppenhuis 1995 for elections to the European Parliament). We already know a lot about what drives turnout at different levels and the aim of this workshop is not to add another set of explanations to it. The main goal of the workshop is rather to explore why turnout matters and what the consequences and implications of low turnout in elections or popular vote are.

Many scholars and/or political commentators complain after an election or popular vote at which there is a low turnout but they do not usually specify why this is problem. There is a general feeling that low turnout is a sign of malfunction of a democracy. On one hand it is a sign of general disengagement or alienation; on the other it threatens the representativeness of decision-making as non-voters are not heard in democratic process. Not all agree. For instance, we know that voting itself is a paradox and not voting is rational in the sense that the likelihood that a single vote counts is very close to zero (Blais 2000). Scholars who see democracy rather as a method of selecting political leaders seem to be less concerned about non-voting, as long as access is guaranteed (Downs 1957, Schumpeter 1942).
Relation to existing research

Lijphart (1997) argues that low turnout is a serious democratic problem and democracy’s biggest unsolved dilemma. While a significant amount of research has been carried out in the US context, in which class differences in turnout are relatively large, it is not yet clear whether the findings from the US are valid for other countries as well. The US experience should be validated against studies in other countries where class differences are smaller (see Oppenhuis 1995) or widened towards comparative studies which encompass a range of patterns. Even as it stands, lot of the research is still puzzling and/or contradictory. Several reasons can be given why turnout could matter.

Low turnout matters in a formal way when there is an institutional requirement for a certain level of participation for an election or a popular vote to be valid. In several countries if turnout is below a particular threshold, elections or referendums lack any formal legitimacy. But how does this work in practice? Does it alter campaigning strategies? And when elections are re-run because of low turnout, does the ‘new’ result differ from the old one?

In a US debate in the 1950s, and again in a German debate in the 1990s, scholars argued whether non-voting is linked to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with democracy. If non-voting expresses political dissatisfaction and mistrust in the political elite, democrats should be seriously concerned; however if non-voting expresses political apathy due to a general satisfaction with democracy, non-voting should not be seen as a major problem (see e.g. Maier 2000). Non-voters could be a potential threat to democracy because they have lower commitments to democracy than voters and having higher turnout could then lead to strengthening non-democratic political forces (Bennett and Resnick 1990). Is low turnout a sign of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with democracy and is it connected with anti-democratic values in some countries?

A number of political theorists (Pateman 1970; Barber 1980) have highlighted participatory aspects of democracy even beyond participation in elections while others such as Schumpeter (1942) or Sartori (1997) mistrust mass participation and citizens’ capacity for self-government and are not very worried about voter participation. But we know that participation is not randomly distributed among the entire population, different social characteristics are linked to participation. That is why low turnout might have direct or indirect effects on political outcomes.

Direct effects: The most obvious problem with low turnout is that it may lead to a distortion in the outcome of an election or a popular vote. Lijphart (1997) explains why this might be the case: (1) low turnout is systematically biased against less well-to-do citizens. (2) Unequal turnout spells unequal influence. One common assertion is that the left parties suffer because lower class citizens have stronger left preferences but are less likely to vote. Empirical results on that are not very clear so far. In some studies, low turnout leads to a systematic distortion in party support. Pacek and Radcliff (1995) and DeNardo (1980) find that left parties are disadvantaged through lower turnout. However, not everybody agrees that there is a direct influence. Several studies deny systematic differences in party and policy preferences between voters and non-voters (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Teixeira 1992, Tóká 2002). One of the difficulties with the approach of comparing voters with non-voters is that non-voters are usually less informed than voters and that if non-voters were to become informed enough to vote they might change their preferences (Lijphart 1997) although this could, of course, amplify or reduce the differences found in such studies. Low turnout could increase as
well the risk of short term mobilization of populist parties and leaders among citizens that usually don’t vote, because the number of people that can be mobilized is larger than in democracies with high turnout.

**Indirect effects:** Consequences of low turnout could also be indirect. Some scholars argue the class bias leads to a situation where policies favour the privileged groups - in which turnout is higher. This does not have to be always the case. Political elites should not exclude the preferences of the non-voters because non-voters could potentially vote against them in a next election should their interests be systematically neglected. However, some research found that the policies of the underprivileged groups are systematically biased. E.g. Hill and Leighley (1992) finds that the greater the class bias the lower the support for redistributive policies (see as well Hill and Leighley 1996, Hicks and Swank 1992) or the less equal are income distribution (Mueller and Stratmann forthcoming). When policies of privileged citizens are of greater concern for political elites because they tend to vote more, one could assume, that low turnout has an effect on the campaign of political elites. Because of the wide absence of young age groups on the polls or because of a class bias, it could well be that campaigns focus strongly on the political agenda of the participating groups and issues that would matter for non-voters are debated in the political system are not even on the agenda (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992).

**Types of paper**

Papers are welcomed which address the following sorts of questions:

- Whether turnout has a direct effect on the outcome of elections and/or popular votes.
- Whether turnout has an indirect influence, that certain policies favoured by voters are preferred by political elites to policies that would be more favourable to non-voters.
- Papers that discuss reasons (in terms of political attitudes) for non-voting and its link to possible consequences, e.g. do non-voters have less democratic attitudes; is non-voting linked to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with democracy.
- Whether non-voting has implications for the quality of democracy (from a rather normative or more a rational choice perspective).
- Whether campaigns deliberate ignore low-participant groups: is there evidence of campaigns ignoring groups with a low propensity to vote?
- The question of mobilization: low turnout makes it easier for the mobilization of special interest to have an effect on the outcome.

Papers should focus not so much on explaining turnout but more on the consequences of low turnout, or papers should link explanations of low turnout with possible consequences. Empirical papers are welcomed that study national, sub-national (European) or local level elections or popular votes; so also are single country studies, cross-national comparisons, and papers comparing different policies. Papers that discuss the topic in purely theoretical terms are welcomed as well.

**References**


**Biographical note**

Georg Lutz is about to complete his PhD at the University of Berne where he had completed his Masters in 2000. He worked in the Swiss election study of 1999 and is currently a visiting research fellow at Trinity College Dublin. His research focuses on voting behaviour and political institutions.

Michael Marsh is an associate professor at Trinity College Dublin, and co-director of the first even Irish national election study. His publications include two collections of ECPR papers: *Candidate selection in comparative perspective* (Sage, 1988) and *Selecting Party Leaders* (EJPR, 1993).