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Benefits and Costs of Voting

JOSEP M. COLOMER

Department of Political Science, Autonomous University of Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra, Spain

The model of the rational voter assumes that the choice between voting and abstaining basically depends on expected benefits and costs. This article offers a test of these assumptions, conceiving benefits of voting as deriving from the importance of politics (measured through the relative public expenditure) and from differential democratic system, and costs of voting coming from voluntary vote and voluntary registration of electors. The analysis compares average turnout with other respective data from 21 democratic countries over the period 1974–87. The results of regressions strongly support the rational choice theory.

The model of the rational voter assumes that the choice between voting and abstaining depends on the expected benefits and costs.

Part of the discussion of this model has focused on the paradox that, in large electorates, the probability of one vote altering the outcome is so small that, when there is some cost, a predictable rational action would be to abstain. But this paradox has been reduced in several ways, assuming a high subjective perception of the political benefits from voting or a strategic behaviour of voters such as conjectures on behaviour of others, minimax regret decision, and so on (see, among others, Tullock, 1967; Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974; Owen and Grofman, 1984).

It appears, then, legitimate to take the benefits and costs of voting as basic explanatory factors of the rational decision of the voter and, in a collective aggregate, of the relative level of electoral participation (even though it can be considered that the voter's perception of the influence of his vote in the outcome would enter, among other factors, in the absolute level of participation).

The calculus of decision based on benefits and costs is also consistent with the theory of abstention in spatial models of electoral competition. In this there are two types of abstention, for indifference and for alienation. The former, based on the idea of 'cross-pressure' coming from the behavioural theory, in rational terms means that the elector obtains no differential benefits from the victory of one party or the other. In the second type of abstention it is assumed there is 'enough' distance between the elector preference and the position of the closest party to provide disincentive to vote. This is an intuitive idea which must also be understood to mean that the distance is 'enough' where benefits are regarded as inferior to the costs of voting.

The design of this article is testing the basic assumptions of the rational voter based on an operationalization in four variables of the benefits and costs of voting.
and on an analysis of the data of electoral participation in 21 countries over a period of 14 years. The result, as will be seen, strongly supports the rational choice theory.

**Basis in the Theory**

In Downs's interpretation of vote as an investment, the benefits from voting come from the differential policies of parties in electoral contest and are conceptualized as differential benefits of party. The costs of voting are measured in time, money and effort to obtain information, deliberate and vote, and other selective incentives for voting are also perceived.

However, Downs himself points out that other political benefits derive from the existence of the democratic system, independently of which party wins the elections and is in the government. These political benefits can also motivate the vote. In the author's words: 'Rational men in a democracy are motivated to some extent by a sense of social responsibility independent of their own short-run gains and losses', and we can 'view such responsibility as one part of the return from voting'. Downs assumes that the electorate can estimate that a low turnout would cast the legitimacy of the democratic system in question and could endanger its survival: 'One thing that all citizens in our model have in common is the desire to see democracy work. Yet if voting costs exist, pursuit of short-run rationality can conceivably cause democracy to break down.' Therefore, to summarize Downs, 'the reward a man obtains for voting depends upon: (1) how much he values living in a democracy', besides (2) the benefits derived from the government of one or another party, from the competitiveness between parties (Downs, 1957: 267–8, 270).

Brian Barry has objected to this point stressing that the probability that one vote can be decisive to save democracy is at least too small to be decisive for the electoral triumph of one party (Barry, 1970: 20 ss.). But it is possible to reduce this paradox in a similar way to the former, taking into account each individual's subjective perception of the importance of his vote as well as strategic or ethic considerations. Particularly, the sense of social responsibility is stressed, calling it a sense of civic duty, in Riker and Ordeshook's interpretation of vote as a consumption, valuable in its own right. That sense expresses a subjective satisfaction to vote, from which are enumerated, as examples, the following components: '1. the satisfaction from compliance with the ethic of voting; 2. the satisfaction from affirming allegiance to the political system; 3. the satisfaction from affirming a partisan preference; 4. the satisfaction of deciding, going to the polls, etc.; 5. the satisfaction of affirming one's efficacy in the political system' (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968: 28).

We can interpret that satisfactions 1 and 2 are connected to the benefits from preserving the democratic system, which it is assumed could fail if most people fail to vote. The authors themselves seem to admit that a sense of social responsibility or sense of citizen duty can be interpreted, in rational approach, as benefits: 'the scale of citizen duty turned out to be very similar to the scale of the sense of political efficacy', (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968: 36, note 16). Instead, satisfactions 3, 4, and 5 could be identified as what Downs calls selective incentives, that is, satisfactions derived from the act of voting.

Thus, we obtain two types of benefits and two types of costs for the calculus of the act of voting or abstaining:

Benefits from the party in the government (which Downs conceptualizes as differential party).
Benefits from democracy (called a sense of social responsibility by Downs and a sense of civic duty by Riker and Ordeshook).

Positive costs, basically measurable in time and money (basic to the model).

Selective incentives, that is, satisfactions from the act of voting, which can be considered negative costs (present in Downs as well as in some components of Riker and Ordeshook’s subjective satisfaction of voting).

Discussion and Operationalization

Benefits of Voting

As we have said, we can distinguish two types of benefits: the benefits from the party in the government and the benefits from democracy.

Benefits from the party in the government. According to Downs, we conceptualize the differential benefits from the policies of the government as differential party and propose a new way to measure it.

Perhaps it deserves to be said that the number of parties cannot be considered as an index of ideological distance among parties or differential party. On one hand, we could expect that fewer and ideological close parties is a disincentive to participation (Bingham Powell Jr., 1982, 1986). For example, in the United States, the only country with a pure two-party system, and where there is not a socialist party with parliamentary representation, there is a low turnout. But there is some empirical paradoxes which allow us to doubt that correlation. Switzerland, for example, with twelve or more parties in the Parliament has an even lower turnout than the United States. In this case it can be argued that there is a deliberate mobilization, and not actual competition among parties at the federal level of government in Switzerland, including rotating chairmanship. In fact, in cantons with 22 per cent of the population where only one representative is elected there is not any kind of party competition. However, there are other paradoxical cases in countries with a multi-party system: Japan, for example, with seven or more parties in the Parliament, or France, with six or more parties in the Parliament, also have a low turnout. On the other hand, we should take into account that a multi-party system reduces the role of the electoral result in the government formation, since this usually requires the formation of coalitions. This can also reduce turnout. For this reason, some authors consider the opposite argument rather than the Downsian argument: multi-party system reduces turnout (see, for example, Jackman, 1987).

A similar indetermination can be found in relation to electoral systems. The majoritarian system based on single-member constituencies distorts the vote–seats ratio in the Parliament, and this can depress turnout, but proportional systems favour multi-party systems and the subsequent formation of coalitions also produces a distortion of the vote–seats ratio in the government.

In general, empirical evidence shows indetermination: 'No substantial difference can be found between the average turnovers of the seven countries which have most claim to be considered two-party systems (Austria, Canada, W. Germany, Ireland, United Kingdom, United States) and the seven which have most claim to be considered predominant multi-party systems (France, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Norway, Sweden)', according to criteria of G. Sartori (Crewe, 1981: 257). Likewise, 'variations in turnout among European nation-states do not react consistently to variations in certain measures of the competitiveness of party systems' (Dittrich and
Nørby Johansen, 1983: 113), and 'the moderately varying degrees of party competition found in most of the democracies are not very powerful shapers of the [average] level of turnout' (Bingham Powell, Jr., 1982: 120).

Thus, we propose another way to approach the benefits from the policies of the party that is in the government: the general influence of policies on the interests of the citizen or, what is the same thing, the level of state intervention in economic and social activity.

That is not properly the differential party, which would be measured as a part of this intervention—that part which is different when one or another party is in the government. But we can suppose that the part of the general intervention of the state that changes with a change of party in the government is more or less proportional to the volume of general public intervention of the state.

So, we propose to measure these benefits from the government by public expenditure; more accurately, by the public expenditure of the central government (according to the selected type of general elections in our framework) as a percentage of the gross domestic product in every country. In a country where there is a high relative level of public expenditure (as, for example, the Scandinavian and central European countries), we can suppose there will also be a high volume of public expenditure the destination of which changes with a change of party in the government, and therefore, a high differential party; in other terms, a high level of differential benefits from policies for the citizen that can push him to vote rather than abstain. In a country with a low level of public expenditure (as the United States), the opposite effect will be observed.

This variable can also contribute to explain the higher level of turnout in national or general elections than in local and regional elections, according to the different level of public expenditure per person at every level of the administration. This difference is not visible in the United States as a result of the multiple votations for the different levels of representation which take place in the same electoral process, but is amply significant in the most decentralized European regimes in which the votations are separated in time, as well as in the low level of turnout in European elections.

We can call this variable 'importance of politics'.

Benefits from democracy. Benefits from living in a democracy, independent of which party wins the elections and is in the government, are benefits from liberties.

We can expect that the perception of these benefits will be greater for people who knew and remember alternative (authoritarian) systems and compare differential utilities of a democratic system to an authoritarian system, and in the aggregate, in the countries with some authoritarian domination or serious threat against democracy (for example, a war of aggression from the nazis) during the life of some current generation. More descriptively, this means that the memory of alternative regimes can be an important source of legitimacy to the current regime or sense of 'civic duty' which promotes participation.

So, we propose to measure the subjective perception of the benefits from democracy by the antiquity of a peaceful and not threatened democracy. According to this criterion, we can distinguish two groups of countries: (1) those with democratic regimes destroyed or threatened during World War II or more recently converted to democracy (Japan and most European countries, except the neutrals Switzerland, Sweden and Ireland), and (2) those with older democratic regimes.

We can call this variable 'differential system'.
Costs of Voting

Measuring the costs of voting in time and money, we can consider that the penalization of abstention, that is the legally compulsory vote, will increase the turnout, and that the requirement of a greater effort in order to vote, such as the registration of electors by the initiative of citizens, will decrease the turnout. It would also be appropriate to consider other selective incentives which produce positive or negative costs from the act of voting.

Compulsory vote. There are several democratic countries in which the vote is legally compulsory and, therefore, there is a positive cost to abstention and a selective incentive or negative cost to vote. According to an accessible exposition:

In Australia, Belgium, and Venezuela a citizen who does not vote is in violation of the law and subject to fines and other penalties unless excused by illness. The potential sanctions in Venezuela are particularly harsh. Such penalties have also existed in Costa Rica since 1960 and were in effect in the Netherlands until the 1971 election. Similar penalties and requirements also existed in Chile before its democracy was overthrown, and apparently in Greece before the 1967 military coup as well as at present. Italy does not have legally designated compulsory voting, but nonvoters are stamped as such on their official work and identification papers, and it is widely believed that they are discriminated against in employment and other benefits. (...) The introduction of penalties in Costa Rica increased turnout by about 15%. Elimination of penalties in the Netherlands led to an initial decrease of 16%, although turnout has leveled off at less than 10% below earlier levels. Uruguay enforced constitutional provisions for compulsory voting for the first time in the 1971 election; turnout increased sharply in that election, from 67% to 84% (Weinstein, 1975: 125–6). Moreover, Tingsten (1963) reports that the introduction of compulsory voting in Australia led to an average increase in turnout of around 18% for men, 30% for women (Bingham Powell, Jr., 1982: 113)¹

At the present there is also compulsory voting in Argentina, where there are administrative penalties for the abstainers who cannot justify to being at least 500 km. away from the polling place on the election-day; abstainers have to justify their absence in embassies and consulates in the country where they are at the moment. The turnout in Argentina in 1983 was appreciably high: 82 per cent. There is also compulsory voting in Turkey, where there is a fine of about $8 for non-voting, and where the turnout in 1982 was 91 per cent; and in Austria, although only in three of the nine electoral districts.

Logically, we can expect a high percentage of spoiled ballots in compulsory voting countries. For example, in Belgium in 1981 there were 8.5 per cent spoiled ballots.

Registration. In most democratic countries, registration of electors is the responsibility of the state and is automatic for the citizen who legally resides in it. In these countries, the number of electors is about that of the voting-age population. In some countries, however, there is registration by application of citizens: Australia, Chile, Costa Rica, France, Jamaica, New Zealand, United States, Uruguay and Venezuela. Voluntary registration produces a cost as it is as if the elector had to vote twice. Thus it is to be expected that the electorate will decline in relation to the voting-age population and the turnout will decrease.

Certain distinctions, however, should be noted. In the cases of New Zealand and
Australia, registration is by application of citizens but compulsory. Thus, we will consider them as non-voluntary registrations.

In the list of 21 countries which are the object of our study there are only two countries with registration by application of citizens: France and the United States.

In the case of France, registration is at the same governmental bureau where a citizen has to obtain his obligatory identity card. This could then be considered as an incentive to register.

Instead, in the case of the United States (where there is no official identity card) registration seems an especially arduous chore. Certainly, poll tax and literacy tests were abolished in 1964–70, but, according to some evidence, in most states, potential voters have to register in the county seat and there are other bureaucratic inconveniences as well. Also most states do not allow ordinary citizens (as party activists, for example) to register potential voters. Registration is important because of the high mobility of the population: nearly one-third of the population moves every two years. Thus, some observers have stated that 'contemporary voter registration obstacles thus function as de facto equivalents of the poll tax, literacy test, and other class—and race—oriented restrictions on the suffrage of an earlier era' (Fox and Cloward, 1988: 180).

As a matter of fact, there are significant differences of turnout in the states that do not require pre-registration or allow election-day registration (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States with election-day registration:</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>1984</th>
<th>1988</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>66.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>61.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| United States                          | 55.1 | 55.0 | 50.16 |

If all states had adopted registration laws as permissive as those in the most permissive states (30 days closing date, offices open on Saturdays and in the evenings, allowing absentee registration), turnout would have risen by about nine percentage points (Rosenstone and Wolfinger, 1978; and Glass, Squire and Wolfinger, 1987). Other variations could be explained by the number of places open for registration: for example, there is only one in Manhattan, but many in Chicago, so there is a higher turnout (also in Chicago there are many polling places), (see also Kim, Petrocik and Enokson, 1975).

Other selective incentives. There are also other less significant costs of voting. Among them we can cite the following:

It may be expected that the turnout will vary according to whether the elections are held on a holiday or a work day, according to how many days the voting lasts and the schedule for voting. In Spain the early democratic elections were on work days but the companies were required to give four paid hours to every employee in order to vote, obviously more than the necessary time to go to the polls and
come back, and the elector was required to present a sealed application certifying that he had turned in his vote. Arrangements for absentee voting, such as advance voting (for example, 24 days in Sweden) and postal voting (10 per cent of votes in Sweden), can also have an effect on turnout.

The effect of other factors is more difficult to evaluate. Thus, for example, the number and spatial distribution of polling places (for example, in New Zealand an elector can vote at any polling place, as is the case in Australia so long as it is within the same state). We can take in account, however, that having many places can avoid queuing to vote but it can also increase the likelihood of being selected to serve on juries, which can promote abstention of registration. Another factor is the good or bad weather on the electoral day; however, maybe good weather is an incentive to vote when elections are on a work day, but the same good weather when the elections are on a holiday can increase the temptation to spend the weekend at the beach or camping; inversely for bad weather. Travel facilities for returning to home constituencies should also be cited (for example, in Italy, southern migrant workers in the North or beyond Italy’s frontiers), gifts to voters (for example, in Japan: coca colas and sandwiches, balloons for children), frequency of elections, as too frequent can tire the electors.2.

Data and Results

Our selection of 21 countries has been guided by the following criteria: existence of democratic regimes, understanding democracy as a regime of liberties and alternation of parties in the government; countries with more than 1 million people; and available and trustworthy turnout data.3 The list includes 15 countries from Europe: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, West Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom; two from North America: the United States, Canada; two from Oceania: Australia, New Zealand; and one from Asia: Japan (see data Table 2).

The selected period is 1974–87, which fulfils the following conditions. Firstly, it allows the use of more recent data than other studies. Secondly, it is relatively homogeneous in the political aspect. It includes only periods not affected by major changes of political system (such as, for example, those begun in France in 1958, Greece in 1974, Portugal in 1974–5, and Spain in 1976–7). It also excludes periods with significant changes in electoral systems. For example, enfranchisement of young people, which in most countries took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s (starting with Austria in 1968); the suppression of the compulsory vote in the Netherlands in 1971, which produced a sudden reduction of turnout (from an average turnout of 94.7 per cent in the period 1945–67 to 78 per cent in 1971); the beginning of female suffrage in Switzerland in 1971, which also produced an apparent reduction of turnout (in 1971 71 per cent of men voted and only 49 per cent of women).

For measuring turnout, we have always chosen legislative or 'general' elections (including some countries where there are direct presidential elections, like Austria, France and Portugal), except in the United States, where we have chosen the presidential elections. The measures are carried out using the average turnout of each country, taking into account that there are different numbers of elections during the same period in the various countries, and in order to explain the relative level of turnout in one country compared with other countries.4
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Elections included</th>
<th>Average turnout (registered)</th>
<th>Average turnout (voting-age)</th>
<th>Public expenditure (% GDP)</th>
<th>Recent threat to democracy</th>
<th>Compulsory vote</th>
<th>Automatic registration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>76, 79, 83, 87</td>
<td>91.3</td>
<td>95.3</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>75, 79, 83, 86</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>90.1</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>74, 77, 78, 81, 85, 87</td>
<td>93.6</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>74, 77, 81, 85</td>
<td>80.8</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>76, 79, 82, 85</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>86.6</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>75, 77, 79, 81, 84, 87</td>
<td>86.8</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>75, 76, 79, 80, 83, 85, 87</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>77, 81, 82, 86</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>74, 75, 77, 80, 83, 87</td>
<td>94.4</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Germany</td>
<td>76, 80, 83, 84, 87</td>
<td>89.4</td>
<td>81.9</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>77, 79, 82, 86</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>75, 78, 81, 84, 87</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U. Kingdom</td>
<td>74, 74, 79, 83, 87</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>38.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>77, 81, 82, 82, 87</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>45.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>77, 81, 85</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>82.8</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>75, 79, 83, 87</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>78, 81, 86</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>76, 79, 80, 83, 86</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>74, 79, 80, 84</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>76, 80, 84</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>75, 79, 83, 87</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: In the third column data of turnout are corrected corresponding to the population voting-age, like the only available data for the United States, using differential coefficients elaborated from Glass, Squire and Wolfinger (1984: Table 1). However, this correction has a problem: to account for resident foreigners (aliens) in voting-age without legal right to vote. This especially affects Switzerland, where rules require a twelve-year residency to become a citizen; using corrected data, level of turnout in Switzerland would be close to the United States.
The first thing apparent on observing the statistics on average turnout in the various countries are the great differences between them. There is more than 50 per cent difference between Italy, the first country on the list, and the United States and Switzerland, at the bottom. But there are also significant differences in turnout between countries of similar sociological characteristics and political cultures like France and Italy, with nearly 25 per cent variation between them.

Secondly, it is important to point out the high stability of level of turnout within countries across the period, without a clear general tendency to increase or decline over time. Half of the countries have less than 5 per cent change in levels of turnout; only three: Portugal, Spain and New Zealand, have more than 10 per cent change in levels of turnout (the two former countries, obviously for reasons of instability corresponding to the early times of the new democratic regimes).

This allows us to think that institutional factors (as stable features of every political situation) are important for the individual behaviour of many people and consequently for the aggregate: relative level of turnout in every country. Even so, maybe some differences across time could be explained for conjunctural reasons: closeness, etc.

Appearing below are several comparisons of average turnout and each one of the other variables in different groups of countries formed according to the levels of these variables, linear regressions between turnout and each of one of the other variables in all countries, and multilinear regression between turnout and the selected four variables in all countries.

**Benefits**

*Importance of politics.* We observe the four lowest countries in relative public expenditure (less than 25 per cent of GDP) are four of the five lowest countries in turnout (less than 72 per cent). We find the following correlations: 17 first countries with relative high public expenditure have a turnout average of 82.4 per cent; and 4 latest countries with relative low public expenditure (United States, Canada, Switzerland and Japan) have a turnout average of 59.2 per cent.

The regression is:

\[ Y = 50.5 + 0.79 X_1; S_{YX1} = 9.58\%; R^2 = 0.37 \]

(where \( Y \): average turnout; \( X_1 \): average relative public expenditure)

*Differential system.* We observe these correlations: 14 countries with threatened democracies during World War II or converted later to democracy after dictatorships have an average turnout of 81.7 per cent; and 5 countries with longer political stability (United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland) have an average turnout of 69.5 per cent.

The regression is:

\[ Y = 69.5 + 12.2 X_2; S_{YX2} = 10.76\%; R^2 = 0.21 \]

(where \( Y \): average turnout; \( X_2 \): recent threat to democracy)

**Costs**

*Compulsory voting.* We observe four of the five countries with compulsory voting are the first four countries in level of turnout. There is the following correlation: five countries with compulsory voting (Italy, Austria (1/3), Belgium, Greece, Australia) have an average turnout of 88.6 per cent, and 16 countries without
compulsory voting have an average turnout of 74.2 per cent.

The regression is:

\[ Y = 74.7 + 14.6 \times X_3; \quad S_{yx3} = 10.6\%; \quad R^2 = 0.23 \]

(where \( Y \): average turnout; \( X_3 \): compulsory voting)

**Registration.** We find the following correlations: 17 countries with automatic registration have an average turnout of 79.1 per cent, and four countries with registration by application of citizens (Australia, France, New Zealand, and United States) have an average turnout of 69.1 per cent.

The regression is:

\[ Y = 64.2 + 14.9 \times X_4; \quad S_{yx4} = 10.99\%; \quad R^2 + 0.17 \]

(where \( Y \): average turnout; \( X_4 \): automatic registration)

**Benefits and Costs**

Finally, there is this multilinear regression between turnout and the four selected variables:

\[ Y = 46.82 + 0.33 \times X_1 + 17.8 \times X_2 + 9.23 \times X_3 + 6.4 \times X_4 \]

\[ S_e = 6.26; \quad R^2 = 0.73 \]

(where \( Y \): average turnout; \( X_1 \): average relative public expenditure; \( X_2 \): recent threat to democracy; \( X_3 \): compulsory vote; \( X_4 \): automatic registration)

The coefficient of determination indicates that near to three-quarters of the variations in average turnout between countries are explained by the variables with which we have measured the importance of politics, the differential system, and the incentives (or negative costs) derived from compulsory vote and automatic registration of electors.

**Concluding Comments**

We can intuitively confirm the explanatory capability of the model by comparing the characteristics of the countries occupying the top and bottom of Table 2.

At one end we have Italy, where the following incentives to vote are present: a high degree of state intervention in the economy (public expenditure is more than 40 per cent of the gross domestic product); a recent democracy with a vivid memory of fascism and, as well, a difference with, for example, West Germany or Japan, antifascism, which provokes a strong sense of civic duty which leads citizens to vote; compulsory vote and automatic registration of electors. Moreover, there are in Italy other factors not included in the model which could help to explain its high level of electoral participation, such as allowing two days for voting: Sunday, 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., and Monday morning; and facilities on train fares to return home to vote.\(^5\)

At the other end of the Table we have the United States and Switzerland.

In the United States we find a relatively low incentive to vote. This is partly due to several basic characteristics of the country. One is the low central public expenditure (less than 23 per cent of gross domestic product, nearly 20 points lower than the average of the countries of the European Economic Community). Another is the fact of being the oldest and a highly stable democracy, which produces neither memory of an authoritarian regime nor the feeling that democracy can be threatened, and consequently a low sense of civic duty in the abovementioned sense of a lack of appreciation of a differential system. There are also
disincentives derived from other institutional characteristics such as the voluntary vote and registration by application of citizens. There are, finally, other disincentives not included in the model derived from the high costs of the act of voting itself: elections on a work-day; long and very complicated procedures for voting; low subjective perception of closeness of the results, given the existence of more polls with trustworthy predictions of results than anywhere else; projections of votes with virtual winners on television when polls are still open in the West.

Also in the case of Switzerland some of the disincentives to vote are derived from the special historical characteristics of the country, such as the low level of public expenditure, the minor role of the federal government (which includes the non-existence of electoral competition between parties at the federal level of government and chairmanship by turns), and a long and stable history of neutrality and peace. Along with voluntary vote, there are also other factors in Switzerland which could explain its low turnout figures such as the most recent enfranchisement of women, and even the existence of more aliens than anywhere else included in the calculus of the voting-age population.

Notes

1. It is possible to adduce more interesting details on compulsory voting in some countries. Note, for example, this information on Australia: 'The practice [compulsory voting] was universal [in Australia] by 1942. The measure was introduced by the political parties in their own interests. Compulsory voting obviates the need to get out the vote, reduces the need for a large corps of workers and increases informal voting (...). Compulsory voting has also brought about the phenomenon of the 'donkey voter', the elector who numbers the candidates from top to bottom (or, on the Senate ballot paper, from left to right), thus benefiting the candidate whose alphabetic preeminence placed him at the head of the paper. (...) As each voter accepts a ballot his name is crossed off the electoral roll by a polling clerk; those whose names have not been crossed off are pursued by the divisional returning officer, who sends an inquiring letter (known popularly as a 'please explain'); those who cannot provide satisfactory explanations (in practice any plausible reason apart from sheer forgetfulness or preoccupation with other matters) have the option of accepting a small fine ($2) at the hands of the commonwealth electoral officer in their state or of contesting the matter in court. The vast majority of those receiving 'please explain' have the luck or the wit to be able to provide 'valid and sufficient reasons'. Court actions are uncommon' (Aitkin and Kahan, 1974: 440, 447).

In Italy, the Constitution stipulates that voting is a duty, and 'Did not vote' is stamped on the identification papers of abstainers. 'No specific penalties are attached to this entry (...) but such a procedure in a country with a long tradition of bureaucratic control helps to spread the conviction that voting is not only a right but a public duty and that failure to exercise the right might have unfortunate consequences' (Galli and Prandi, 1970: 28–32).

2. The great variety of selective incentives which can be considered to have an effect on the decision to vote or abstain has even led to the following thought: perhaps the best [attempt to fit voting into a framework of rational self-interest] is the half-serious claim that people will vote in order not to be pestered any longer by a succession of political canvassers asking them if they have voted yet' (Ian McLean, 1987: 47).

3. These criteria have brought us not to consider, for example, Mexico, Colombia, South Africa, Turkey, which appear as democratic countries in some statistic data; as well as Iceland, Luxembourg and other small countries. Usually, there are several kinds of difficulties in obtaining homogeneous and trustworthy data because different results are
found in different sources. In some cases, there is deficient basic information, such as deficient census or unofficial results; in others, the use of different criteria, such as registered electors or voting-age population, only valid votes or all votes (including spoiled votes), and so on.

4. Maybe the closeness estimated of the results, which had been emphasized in Downs’s initial formula, could explain some temporal changes in the level of turnout within a country. Usually an electoral result is considered close in a two-party system when there is less than 10 per cent difference between parties (about 55–45). It could be also measured, for example, by frequency of change of the chief executive or of the parliamentary majority.

5. It would also be relevant to consider that there are high benefits to be derived from a high differential party, according to Downs’s formula. In the period in question there were as many as 14 parties in the Parliament, as many as five parties in the government, and a high rate of change of the chief executive. Note this simple description of several factors favourable to a high turnout in which the variables of our model are reflected: ‘In Italy, further [automatic inscription in the census], the high turnout is favored by the celebration of the elections on a holiday, by the existence of special facilities for certain categories (sick people, military personnel, sailors, emigrants, etc.), by the administrative punishment to register ‘Did not vote’ in the certificate of good conduct and, in general, by an element of political culture of postwar Italy: the very extended idea that the act of voting is an important political and moral duty, an element which is strongly influenced by the suppression of electoral participation under fascism.’ ‘In Italy the dominant political culture stresses only or mainly the civic duty to vote and it is a motivation more linked to a more or less justified fear of punishments than to positive elements’ (Sani, 1976).

6. There has been a recent introduction of an easier mechanical procedure for voting in some states, but for example in 1988 in San Francisco the act to vote was so complicated (74 decisions for offices and referendums) that the time to vote had to be limited to the not short period of ten minutes for every elector. Consider also the probably low differential party, in Downs’s sense, derived from the existence of only two parties.

References


