



**Participation and Turnout:
Relating Knowledge and Tools to the Practical Questions facing
Democratic Reformers**

Presentation at

Challenges to Democratic Governance

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This paper is presented in the context of IDEA's mission to produce high-quality and policy-relevant comparative knowledge on democracy promotion made available to, owned and used by key actors at local, national, regional and international levels, addressing the links between the consolidation of democratic institutions and the conditions for strengthening democratic processes. One practical element of this mission is a response to the demand for greater understanding by legislators, electoral management bodies, political commentators and stakeholders in reform debate of the deeper factors affecting electoral participation. A basic element of this is the assembly and dissemination of data relating to turnout worldwide in order that debate and analysis has a broad basis in fact, the principle which underlies the creation of the IDEA voter turnout database and global turnout report (IDEA 2002) and a regional followup for Western Europe (IDEA 2004).

Much of the detailed study of participation has taken place in established democracies. Given the availability of data, this constraint is understandable. It may even be inevitable for some detailed work: Mark Franklin's recent analysis (Franklin 2004) requires data covering the span of a person's membership of the electorate, roughly 50 years. Butler and Stokes suggested long ago (Butler and Stokes 1974) that voting behaviour is broadly socialised in three elections. Franklin's analysis develops and confirms this, or something close to it, in 22 established democracies. The depth of data was required to show that most people establish their pattern of participation (or not) by the third election after they reach voting age, and that for each successive cohort of people reaching voting age this pattern is then not susceptible to change and will retain its effect until they leave the electorate through death. Measures taken now which remain in place for three elections or so will have an effect throughout the voting life of a new or relatively new elector.

But if analysis of participation questions is important for established democracies in developed countries, it is even more so for new and consolidating democracies in developing countries. Questions of institutional and electoral design may well be more open in these countries. The rate of population growth may be much higher, meaning that the socialisation or otherwise of new potential voters will have much larger long term effects. The acceptance and legitimacy of democracy itself may still not be as solid.

Are the same influences at work in established democracies and new democracies, or in developed countries and developing countries? For

example, in developed countries, a higher proportion of educated people turn out, although this does not imply that increasing the level of education will in itself boost turnout. In India, by contrast, Sandeep Shastri told the 2003 CSES conference that 'there are those who vote and those who use the telephone' – and the 2004 National Election Study (CSDS 2004) confirmed that 'the upper castes are increasingly turning away from the electoral arena, while more and more Dalits are firmly moving in this arena'. On the other hand, advantaged groups in Indonesia were more optimistic that their vote would make an impact (TAF 2003).

We may only be able to make best guesses as to what comparative knowledge may be transferable. With the appropriate health warnings, this will still give useful tools to political and institutional reformers – at least enabling them to ask questions rather than working in the dark or being even unaware of the kind of consequences that may result from different decisions. The design options they choose may have impacts that do not become apparent for years and may then take decades to undo.

What do we currently know about factors which affect participation levels?

First, there are *mechanical effects*. Improving physical access to polling stations has an effect. The presence of absentee voting may have an effect – although it may be masked by the tendency to introduce it in response to downward trends in turnout. Richard Rose finds that rest day voting has made a significant difference in European countries since 1945 (Rose 2004a): this is contested by Mark Franklin (Franklin 2004).

Second, there are *systemic and institutional design effects*. Electoral system choice matters: PR tends to be linked with higher turnout (Norris 2004). In majoritarian systems, turnout tends to be higher in districts with closer results (Franklin 2004). This means that boundary delimitation methods also matter. Politicians have an understandable urge to design systems which keep their bottoms on their seats – look at the US House of Representatives – but there is a price to pay in terms of popular engagement in elections.

Mark Franklin also suggests that turnout is lower when the results of elections make little difference to the subsequent form of the executive. On the one hand, the Swiss grand coalition model has led to continuity of government over a long period whatever the results of

individual elections. Looking at the US, the single example in his dataset, he also suggests that separation of powers has in itself an effect on turnout, because it makes the link between voting and the outcome of the election on the executive weaker. If this principle can be generalised, it raises important questions. Does it imply that any country with a presidential system will find lower turnout levels an associated phenomenon, with possible consequences for legitimacy? Does it mean that the existence of compulsory voting, however weakly enforced, in much of Latin America is an important structural feature in maintaining the legitimacy of its democracies? Are there implications for the Philippines, Indonesia, or Georgia in democratic development and institution building?

The role of direct democracy instruments in institutional frameworks may also matter. The turnout in individual Swiss initiative votes is low, but it is said that a high proportion of the Swiss electorate participate in initiative votes taken together. Referendums have generally lower turnout than general elections worldwide, but there is more variation in turnout (LeDuc 2003). However, there are some referendums – for example those on Norwegian EU accession or the independence of Québec – where turnout has been higher than in the preceding general election. More intense campaigns lead to more political knowledge and more reliance on attitudes on issues, especially when cues from political leaders are mixed or unclear.

Third, there are *political effects*. Less people vote when an election is not seen as competitive (Franklin 2004). Canadian elections up to 2000 provide one example (Pammett and LeDuc 2003). The different perception of party competition was an important factor in the 12% drop in turnout in the UK in 2001 (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart and Whiteley 2004). Those people who are going to vote are more likely to vote in elections where they think it matters, and more likely to stay at home when they think it is a foregone conclusion – either nationally or, in a majoritarian system, in their own area (Franklin 2004).

Party identification plays a role in keeping turnout up in 'less relevant' elections (Franklin 2004) - but it is itself on the decline. Again an illustration: the most recent report of the Swedish Election Studies Programme (Holmberg and Oscarsson 2004) shows that the proportion of the Swedish electorate with strong party identification has fallen from 65% in 1968 to 40% in 2002. The fall is particularly marked among those who also have little interest in politics – from 29% to 14%. Nor is party identification necessarily higher in newer democracies: in Indonesia in 2003, approaching a major series of

elections after fundamental institutional changes, 34% were prepared to express a party identification (TAF 2003).

When the political system is perceived as too fragmented, turnout drops (Franklin 2004). Some major parties or coalitions which give coherence to the system appear to be necessary. This has implications for institutional and electoral system design, especially considered alongside factors such as the desirability of inclusion of all groups in an elected legislature in transition, in particular in post-conflict transition. It opens the question of how far it is desirable to see the institutions adopted during transition as themselves transitional – a practice which may run counter to Rein Taagepera's advice (Taagepera 2002) that if rules are continuously altered, no stable electoral system can emerge in which parties and voters know how to respond to system incentives. In effect, advice not to keep pulling up the plant by the roots to see if it is growing.

Mark Franklin does not find that alienation, or general trust in government, are factors that affect turnout. However, Richard Rose (Rose 2004b) found that trust in governing parties, and trust in governments more generally, was related to turnout at the 2004 European Parliament elections. Where governing parties fared badly, turnout was lower. This raises several questions: Is this a one-off occurrence? Or is the inclusion in Rose's analysis of 12 EU member countries outside the Franklin dataset an indication of a substantive difference in the way the newer democracies work in relation to questions of trust? Or does it demonstrate that different factors may apply to turnout in second order elections, including not only European Parliament elections but regional and local elections – a huge area of discussion in which very little work exists?

Fourth, there are *demographic effects* – and they are clearly very long term. The gender balance of the electorate matters. Pippa Norris (Norris 2002a) indicates that the difference in turnout between men and women has shrunk since 1945, with the turnout of women matching or slightly exceeding that of men. The positive effect of female enfranchisement is confirmed by Franklin (2004), showing again that it is an effect that takes perhaps nine elections to fully work through.

Voting rates among younger people are currently lower. Even though they may increase with age and as young people join more settled communities, they are set to remain lower. Turnout will continue to fall while people who are more likely to vote die off, and people less

likely to vote replace them. This effect is bigger when population is increasing – which suggests more profound implications in many newer democracies in the developing world.

The widespread introduction of votes at 18 has diminished turnout: Franklin describes it (Franklin 2004) as “a well-intentioned decision with the unanticipated consequence of giving rise to a lifetime of disenfranchisement for many of the intended beneficiaries.” It is however clearly not practical politics to reverse this. Would lowering the voting age further enable schools to be agencies of democracy education and engagement, as Franklin suggests, or would it make things even worse? And is there now a political vicious circle in which some or all parties respond disproportionately to a ‘grey’ political agenda and will therefore resist changes that would rebalance electoral participation to their possible disadvantage?

How does the socialisation of people into voting work? What makes young people become habitual voters? It is not as if those who do not vote participate in other ways: those who engage in other kinds of participatory activity are also those who vote (Norris 2002b). However, the story of interest in politics is not all gloom. It appears paradoxical that interest in politics in Sweden has increased since 1968 even though turnout has fallen over the same period (Holmberg and Oscarsson 2004). The explanation is a big increase in the number of thoughtful independent people over the period, but also a big increase in the number of uninterested, non-partisan people – both of which groups one may speculate are made up of younger rather than older people. It may be that the biggest challenge in engaging young people switched out of voting in the habit forming years is that of engaging the young, urban, unemployed and unqualified ‘underclass’ who are switched out of society generally. An example of the identification of this kind of non-voting group is found for the Republic of Ireland in Lyons and Sinnott (2003).

What knowledge or skills are needed to engage? Is political knowledge now gained differently from the past, with the proliferation of media channels on which news can be present from 24 hours a day to never, and with the almost instant access to information provided through the Internet? What indeed is now an effective store of political knowledge that enables informed decision making?

The problem is illustrated by the wide range of highly praised voter education undertaken by for example Elections Canada or IFE in Mexico – but Canadian or Mexican turnout still goes down. It is of

course possible that the falls would have been even greater without it! If attitudes to participation are formed in one's first three elections, is any democracy education not aimed specifically at young people a waste of time, or even just not a cost effective use of budgets? There is lots of talk, and a significant amount of activity, in the field of democracy curricula and education civics – but much of it appears to have very limited impact. There does not yet appear to be any basis to understand what may be effective and what not effective, with a consequent danger of the spending of vast amounts of money to no purpose.

Finally

How important is turnout anyway? It is a useful proxy for legitimacy, used as such by media and commentators as well as in academia and thus an inescapable part of real world politics. But we should not forget that it is only a proxy. The real underlying issue is the legitimacy and credibility of democratic government.

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