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Rethinking the partisan effects of higher turnout: So what's the question?*

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Abstract. Controversy persists over the link between turnout and the likelihood of success of Democratic candidates (e.g., DeNardo, 1980, 1986; Zimmer, 1985; Tucker and Vedlitz, 1986; Piven and Cloward, 1988; Texeira, 1992; Radcliff, 1994, 1995; Erikson, 1995a, b). We argue that the authors in this debate have largely been talking past one another because of a failure to distinguish three quite different questions. The first question is: "Are low turnout voters more likely to vote Democratic than high turnout voters?" The second question is: "Should we expect that elections in which turnout is higher are ones in which we can expect Democrats to have done better?" The third question is the counterfactual: "If turnout were to have increased in some given election, would Democrats have done better?" We show the logical independence of the first two questions from one another and from the third, and argue that previous researchers have failed to recognize this logical independence – sometimes thinking they were answering question three when in fact they were answering either question one or question two. Reviewing previous research, we find that the answer to the first question once was YES but, for more recent elections at the presidential level, now appears to be NO, while, for congressional and legislative elections, the answer to the second question appears generally to be NO. However, the third question is essentially unanswerable absent an explicit model of why and how turnout can be expected to increase, and/or analyses of individual level panel data. Thus, the cross-sectional and pooled data analyses of previous research are of almost no value in addressing this third question.

1. Introduction

There is a vast literature in Public Choice on voter turnout. Yet, remarkably, as far as we are aware, scholars associated with the Public Choice School have not looked at two interlinked questions of considerable concern in the mainstream political science literature, namely the link between turnout and the demographic representativeness of the voting electorate, on the one hand, and the link between turnout and partisan success, on the other. Few pieces of

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conventional wisdom in American politics are as stubborn as the notion that high voter turnout benefits the Democratic party. Based on a simple premise – that high turnout is a function of low-propensity voters going to the polls, these voters being overwhelmingly Democratic – this idea has permeated journalistic analyses of the implications of high election-day turnout and of long-run turnout decline. The claim is that the more representative the electorate is of the total population, and the less weighted is the tilt among voters toward those of higher income and education, the better will Democrats do.

Over the last several decades, a chorus of prominent voices in political science have criticized this conventional view of the link between turnout and Democratic success (e.g., Key, 1958; Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960; Rosenstone and Wolfinger, 1978; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Wolfinger, Rosenstone, and McIntosh, 1981; DeNardo, 1980, 1986; Zimmer, 1985; Bennett and Resnick, 1990; Texeira, 1992) but this "common wisdom" nonetheless has continued to be supported not just by journalistic pundits but also by political science research (Burnham, 1965, 1982; Tucker and Vedlitz, 1986; Piven and Cloward, 1988; Radcliff, 1994). The purpose of this essay is to cast new light on the debate.

The central basis for the claim that high turnout helps Democrats by increasing the representativeness of the electorate can be best explained by using Burnham's (1965) adaptation of ideas first offered by Campbell et al. (1960). The American political universe can be conceptualized as a series of three concentric circles: core voters, occasional voters, and perpetual nonvoters. As one moves from the center circle to the periphery, the proportion who identify with the Democratic party increases, since low participation is correlated with low socioeconomic status (Verba and Nie, 1972), and the Democrats are the traditional champions of the poor and underprivileged. Since core voters always participate, any increase in turnout is attributed to a rise in participation by occasional voters and usual nonvoters who supposedly disproportionately identify with the Democratic party. Hence a high turnout should help the Democrats by making the electorate more representative of the population as a whole when a higher than usual proportion of customarily low turnout Democratic identifiers come to the polls. Q.E.D.

Potential flaws in this reasoning have long been recognized. In an important contribution to the debate, Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960: 110–112) point out that although early empirical studies done in the New Deal period found that nonvoters were preponderantly Democratic, the weaker party identification of usual nonvoters suggests that they would be more susceptible to short-term electoral forces, and would be more likely to jump on the bandwagon of the winning campaign than to vote consistently Demo-

cratic. DeNardo (1980), in what is probably the best known article on the link between turnout and Democratic success, agrees with this notion, asserting that the "joke is on the Democrats", since high turnout essentially benefits the party that attracts the most defectors. Texeira (1992: 87), looking at nonvoters in National Election Studies (NES) and census data, buttressed the findings of Campbell et al. (1960) and DeNardo (1980) by showing that nonvoters "are particularly likely to disregard partisan and other preferences and surge in the direction of the candidate that appears to be winning".

We can summarize most previous research in terms of three basic insights as to which party can be expected to benefit from high turnout. We shall refer to the Burnham/Piven and Cloward stress on the importance of the fact that nonvoters are disproportionately Democratic in their partisan learnings as **the partisan bias effect** and the Campbell et al./DeNardo/Texeira idea of peripheral voters being more susceptible to short-term forces as **the bandwagon effect**.[1] A third effect has been identified by Grofman, Collet, and Griffin (1995). They posit that one important reason that turnout varies between elections (although certainly not the only reason) is because of a **competition effect** in which high turnout is most likely to occur when a contest is close.[2] Grofman, Collet, and Griffin (1995) posit that a competition effect can arise if growing unpopularity of an incumbent leads to an increase in voters who seek to unseat him/her turning out at the polls and/or if potential vulnerability of an incumbent to a successful challenge leads to a campaign by a well-financed challenger whose campaign succeeds in attracting more voters to the polls.[3]

The partisan bias effect would appear to lead us to expect that, *ceteris paribus, higher turnout would benefit Democrats*; in contrast, the bandwagon effect would seem to lead us to expect that, *ceteris paribus*, higher turnout would have no effect on the success of Democrats *qua* Democrats because partisan impact would depend on the direction of the electoral tide.[4] High turnout should *benefit the winning party* by increasing its victory margin. When the competition effect is present, high turnout will be correlated with disadvantage to incumbents and thus, on balance, *will appear to benefit Democrats only in situations where Republicans are incumbents*. Clearly, all three effects may be simultaneously present.

We believe that the authors in the debate about the partisan consequences of turnout have largely been talking past one another because of a failure to distinguish three quite different questions. The first question is: "Are low turnout voters more likely to vote Democratic than high turnout voters?" The second question is: "Should we expect that elections in which turnout is higher are one in which we can expect Democrats do better?" The third question is the counterfactual: "If turnout were to have increased in some given election, would Democrats have done better?" We assert that the answers to these three

questions are both logically and empirically independent of one another, and that each is best addressed with a quite different type of data.[5]

To answer the first question, "Are low turnout voters more likely to vote Democratic than high turnout voters?", requires deciding whether the bandwagon effect is more important than the partisan bias effect, and answering this question requires looking at individual level data.[6]

To answer the second question, "Should we expect that elections in which turnout is higher are one in which we can expect Democrats do better?", requires us to look across elections to see whether high turnout is associated with greater Democratic success. The five major published articles on the partisan consequences of turnout (DeNardo, 1980, 1986; Zimmer, 1985; Tucker and Vedlitz, 1986; Radcliff, 1994, 1995) rely on the sign of aggregated level correlations as their indicator of whether or not the hypothesized aggregate level link between turnout and Democratic success is present. In our view, these studies can thus best be seen as addressed to this second question, although they make claims for their results that are more general.

The third question, "If turnout were to have increased in some given election, would Democrats have done better?", is a counterfactual that is unanswerable absent an explicit model of why and how turnout can be expected to increase. We believe that none of the methods of analysis used in previous research directly bear on this question,[7] and that it can best be addressed with panel data on the evolution of vote intentions and likelihood of voting across the course of an election.[8]

In the next section of the paper we analytically demonstrate the logical independence of the three questions. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for a better understanding of the mechanisms that link turnout and Democratic success. We argue that, once we recognize that relationships may have changed over time and may differ for legislative and presidential elections, it is only this crucial third question that is really in dispute.

2. The logical independence of our three questions about the relationship between turnout and Democratic success

It is important to establish that our three basic questions are logically independent of one another.

2.1. *The logical independence of question one and question three*

We should not expect that the partisan consequences of turnout *increases* among projected (or actual) nonvoters will necessarily mirror the mean

Democratic proclivities of nonvoters. As V.O. Key noted, the partisan impact of increases in turnout depends on the exact "sectors of the population from which the increment in vote comes" (1958: 67).[9] Some of the nonvoters may be much more likely to participate than others. Increasing turnout among nonvoters can either increase or decrease Democratic vote share, depending upon (a) the frequency distribution of voter turnout propensities, and (b) the exact shape of the function relating turnout propensities to Democratic vote proportion.

To illustrate how the answer to question one ("Are low turnout voters more likely to vote Democratic than high turnout voters?") need not be related to the answer to question three ("If turnout were to have increased in some given election, would Democrats have done better?") we can consider a very basic model in which we specify both the expected turnout, on the one hand, and the expected proportion of votes that would go to the Democratic candidate if everyone voted, on the other, as a function of some underlying characteristic of the electorate.

Let

v = a real variable, with values from 0 to 1, representing voter "type", i.e., a scaling of some particular attribute of the voters.

For the moment we need not be specific about what v is. We may simply think of it as a scale that could be based on voter SES, say, or perhaps on some measure of a voter's partisan attitudes.

Further, let

D = Democratic vote share (if turnout was one hundred percent),

R = Republican vote share (if turnout was one hundred percent) (= 1–D),

T = turnout,

and posit that

D = f(v) = fraction voting Democratic among those who vote and who have attribute v,

R = 1–f(v)	=	fraction voting Republican among those who vote and who have attribute v
T = g(v)	=	fraction who vote among those with attribute v

Let us further assume that the total population can be characterized by a some density function, φ(v), such that the total population is given by

$$\int_0^1 \varphi(\mathrm{v})\ \mathrm{dv}$$

Because we will always be integrating between 0 and 1 we will henceforth not bother to specify the bounds on the definite integral.

Now, if everyone voted, the proportion of the electorate that would vote Democratic is given by

$$\int \varphi(\mathrm{v})\ \mathrm{f}(\mathrm{v})\ \mathrm{dv}$$

Let us now posit a variable, i, that characterizes the overall degree of interest in some election and let

T = g(v,i)	=	fraction of those with characteristic v who vote in a given election in which the interest level is i, where we may assume that $\partial \mathbf{g}/\partial \mathbf{i} > 0$.

For notational simplicity, we will take i as exogenously given and represent T simply as g(v). Without loss of generality we may assume that turnout decreases with increasing v, i.e., that $\partial \mathbf{g}/\partial \mathbf{v} < 0$, and that g(v) is appropriately bounded, e.g., at $\mathrm{v} = 0$, g is not more than 1, while $\mathrm{v} = 1$, g is not less than 0.

If v is in some way a measure of SES characteristics, not only would it be the case that the higher the SES the higher the turnout, but the lower, on average the propensities of voters to vote Democratic. Similarly, if v is some measure of partisan identification then we might similarly expect not only that $\partial \mathbf{g}/\partial \mathbf{v} < 0$, but also that $\partial \mathbf{f}/\partial \mathbf{v} > 0$. In general we will assume that $\partial \mathbf{f}/\partial \mathbf{v} > 0$.

Under these assumptions, the total vote is

$$\int \varphi(\mathrm{v})\ \mathrm{g}(\mathrm{v})\ \mathrm{dv}$$

The total Democratic vote is

$$\int \varphi(\mathrm{v})\ \mathrm{g}(\mathrm{v})\ \mathrm{f}(\mathrm{v})\ \mathrm{dv}$$

Now, the share of the vote received by the Democrat can be specified as a function h, defined by

$$h(v) = \frac{\int \varphi(v)\, g(v)\, f(v)\, dv}{\int \varphi(v)\, g(v)\, dv} \tag{1}$$

In other words, Democratic vote share is simply Democratic vote divided by total vote.

Answering question one yes, "Are low turnout voters more likely to vote Democratic than high turnout voters?", is equivalent to saying that $\partial \mathbf{f}/\partial \mathbf{g}$ is uniformly negative. Answering question three yes, "If turnout were to have increased in this election, would Democrats have done better?", is equivalent to saying that $\partial \mathbf{h}/\partial \mathbf{g}$ is uniformly positive. In other words, if the answers to questions one and three are the same, then the signs of $\partial \mathbf{f}/\partial \mathbf{g}$ and $\partial \mathbf{h}/\partial \mathbf{g}$ will be opposite to one another.

Below we provide linear functions f and g, for Democratic vote propensities and turnout propensities that satisfy the requirements that $\partial \mathbf{g}/\partial \mathbf{v} < 0$ and $\partial \mathbf{f}/\partial \mathbf{v} > 0$. These linear functions will allow us to illustrate our basic points without adding undue mathematical complexity. In particular they allow us to illustrate the basic idea of how Equation (1) works and to make the point that, although both f and h are a function of v, the signs of $\partial \mathbf{f}/\partial \mathbf{g}$ and of $\partial \mathbf{h}/\partial \mathbf{g}$ may go in either the same or in the opposite direction, i.e., we may get different answers to question one and question three.

Let

$$D = rv + s = f(v) \tag{2}$$

$$T = -mv + b = g(v) \tag{3}$$

where r, s, m, and b are positive real values constrained so that both f and g remain within [0,1] for v within [0,1].[10]

We may rewrite f as

$$f(v) = -r(T - b)/m + s = -(r/m)T + (rb + ms)/m. \tag{2'}$$

Hence, $\partial \mathbf{f}/\partial \mathbf{g} = -r/m$, which is uniformly negative under the assumptions specified. Thus, under the above assumptions the answer to question one is YES.[11]

But what about the answer to question two?

For analytic simplicity, let us assume a uniform density over the [0,1] interval, i.e.,

$$\varphi(v) = 1. \tag{4}$$

Equation (1), under these simplifying assumptions about the linearity of f(v) and g(v), gives us h(v) as

$$h(v) = \frac{\int(-rmv^2 - (sm - br)v + sb)dv}{\int(-mv + b)dv.} \qquad (2')$$

Solving, we obtain a value of

$$h(v) = (-rm/3 - (sm - br)/2 + sb)/(-m/2 + b)$$

which simplifies to

$$(-2mr + 3br - 3sm + 6bs)/3(2b - m)$$

If we increase g by increasing b, then the change in h wrt b can be solved for using the quotient rule. After some algebra, we find

$$\partial \mathbf{h}/\partial \mathbf{b} = rm/3(2b - mm)^2$$

Since both numerator and denominator are positive, *ceteris paribus*, h(v) is an increasing function of b. Increasing b is equivalent to raising the turnout levels of all voters, regardless of their partisan inclinations. But, since, under the above assumptions Democratic vote share is less than would be achieved if everyone turned out, and the new voters added by increasing b mirror the Democratic proclivities of the total electorate, raising b increases Democratic vote share.

Similarly, if we increase h(v) by decreasing m, then, *ceteris paribus*, the change in H is again always positive. To see that this is so we use the quotient rule to solve for $\partial \mathbf{h}/\partial \mathbf{m}$. We find that

$$\partial \mathbf{h}/\partial \mathbf{m} = -rb/3(2b - m)^2$$

Thus, $\partial \mathbf{h}/\partial \mathbf{m}$ is uniformly negative, since both b and r are positive values, increasing turnout by lowering m will have a positive affect on Democratic vote share. Lowering m is equivalent to reducing the gap in turnout between more Democratic leaning and less Democratic leaning voters.

These two cases of an increase solely in b or a decrease solely in m are shown graphically in Lines 1a and 1b, respectively, in Figure 1 (for values of $r = .7$ and $s = .2$). Of course, if we were to both increase b and decrease m this too would lead both to higher turnout and higher Democratic share of the vote.

Intuitions based on results like the above are no doubt responsible for the commonsense belief that, if nonvoters are more Democrat in their predilections than are voters, then raising turnout must help Democrats. However, *that belief is wrong, as some reflection will reveal*.

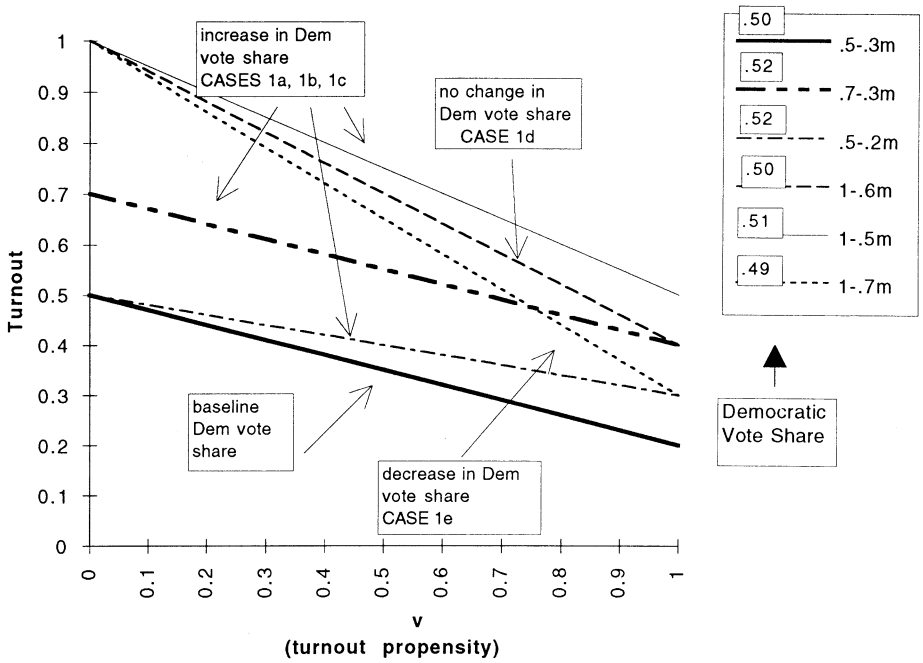

Figure 1. A linear model of the link between turnout propensities and democratic vote shore

What must be understood is that while either increasing b alone or decreasing m alone (or doing both) will both increase turnout and increase Democratic vote share, if we affect turnout by changing the values of b and m *simultaneously* but in the same direction, then Democratic vote share may go in a direction opposite from that of turnout.[12] Lines 1c, 1d and 1e in Figure 1 (again for values of r = .7 and s = .2) illustrate that possibility. Despite *dramatic* overall increases in turnout compared to the baseline case, in one instance we have only a marginal increase over the baseline Democratic vote share of 50% (to 51%), in the other a marginal decrease (to 49%), while in the third case Democratic vote share actually stays unchanged at 50%.[13]

We show a parallel analysis in tabular rather than graphical form in Table 1. This table shows the Democratic vote proportion for various positive values of m and b, under the assumption of a uniform distribution on v, for fixed values of r and s. It is apparent from columns 2–6 in this table that, when we hold m constant but raise b, both Turnout and Democratic vote share increase. Similarly, from columns 6–11 we see that when we hold b constant but decrease m, again both T and Democratic vote share increase. Now let us look at columns that differ in both m and b. If we compare, say, column 7 with column 3, we find the former has both a higher turnout than the latter (.80

Table 1. The link between Democratic vote share and turnout under a simple linear model[a]

m	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.8
b	0.3	0.5	0.7	0.9	1	1	1	1	1	1
r	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7
s	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
g(v) = Turnout among eligibles	0.15	0.35	0.55	0.75	0.85	0.8	0.75	0.7	0.65	0.6
Dem. vote share if everyone voted	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.55
Democratic total vote/potential electorate	0.07	0.175	0.29	0.40	0.45	0.42	0.38	0.35	0.32	0.28
Republican total vote/potential electorate	0.08	0.175	0.26	0.35	0.40	0.38	0.37	0.35	0.33	0.32
h(v) = Dem vote share of the actual electorate	0.43	0.50	0.52	0.53	0.53	0.52	0.51	0.50	0.49	0.47

[a]Here Democratic vote share = rv + s = f(v) and Turnout = –mv + b = g(v), where r, s, m, and b are positive real values constrained so that both f and g remain within [0,1] for v within [0,1].

versus .35), and a higher Democratic vote share (.52 *versus* .50). However, if we compare, say, column 8 with column 4, we find the former has higher turnout than the latter (.75 *versus* .55), yet has a lower Democratic vote share (.51 *versus* .52). The same is true if we compare column 10 with column 3.[14] Moreover, we may have two columns with essentially identical turnout but very different Democratic vote shares (e.g., columns 5 and 8), or two columns with essentially identical Democratic vote shares but very different turnout (e.g., columns 3 and 9, or 4 and 7).

Figure 1 and Table 1 illustrate the general point that even if nonvoters are more Democratic than voters, this does not imply that all increases in turnout will result in gains for the Democrats. Another striking feature of the hypothetical data in Figure 1 and Table 1 is how little effect even substantial changes in turnout can have on Democratic vote share.

Thus we see that even if the answer to question one is yes, whether the answer to question 3 is yes depends exactly how the turnout increase comes about. Even under the simplest possible assumptions given above – ones involving linear relationships, and a uniform distribution of voter characteristics – the way in which changes in h(v) are linked to changes in m and b is quite complex, as a glance at Equation (4) will reveal.

2.2. *The logical independence of question one and question two*

Question one and three deal with turnout/turnout propensities within a given election. Question two ("Should we expect that elections in which turnout is higher are one in which we can expect Democrats do better?") requires us to look at turnout variations and variations in Democratic vote share across elections. Even if it is true that (probable) nonvoters are more Democratic in their inclinations than (probable) voters in each and every election, this fact does not imply that those elections with higher turnout will necessarily have higher Democratic vote shares. Not only do we need to understand why turnout goes up or down, but we may find that changes in turnout and changes in partisan voting proclivities may be interconnected.[15] Exactly how they are interconnected will be an important factor in determining whether or not the answers to questions one and two will be the same.

Imagine, for example, that higher turnout is observed in highly competitive elections and that such elections are often ones in which an incumbent loses because of a loss of popularity (or a shift of support to an especially well-qualified opponent attracted by incumbent vulnerability) that permeates the entire electorate. But then, if most incumbents are Democrats, higher turnout will be associated with Democratic losses (or near losses) *even if nonvoters are always more Democratic in their learnings than voters in every election*.[16]

2.3. *The logical independence of question two and question three*

Although questions one and three are logically independent and questions one and two are logically independent, it does not follow that questions two and three are also logically independent. To show that they are independent simply requires a thought experiment similar to that immediately above.

As noted earlier, answering question three yes ("If turnout were to have increased in this election, would Democrats have done better?") is equivalent to saying that $\partial \mathbf{h}/\partial \mathbf{g}$ is uniformly positive. Answering question two yes ("Should we expect that elections in which turnout is higher are one in which we can expect Democrats do better?") requires us to look at turnout variations and variations in Democratic vote share across elections. Even if it is true that $\partial \mathbf{h}/\partial \mathbf{g} > 0$ this fact does not imply that those elections with higher turnout will necessarily have higher Democratic vote shares. Even if it were true that in every election higher turnout would have benefited the Democrats, this says nothing about whether it will be the high turnout or the low turnout elections in which Democrats do best.

Imagine, for example, a selection effect such that in each election higher turnout would benefit the incumbent, but such that high turnout elections tend to be ones where incumbents do badly. This could happen because of

the competition effect described earlier. Indeed, we could easily imagine that even among the usually low turnout voters (including a disproportionate share of Democrats) the incumbent would lose, but with greater support among these voters than among the more knowledgeable voters who have a high predisposition to turnout and who may be more familiar with the incumbent's recent peccadilloes. In contrast, when the incumbent was not in trouble, then turnout would be low, and the incumbent would win. Again, if most incumbents are Democrats – which has been true for the U.S. House for most of the past four decades until 1994 and still is true in most state legislatures, we would find that the highest turnout elections were ones in which, on average, the Democrats did worst.

3. Empirical findings

3.1. *How representative is the electorate?*

There is an ongoing debate in the political science literature on how representative the U.S. electorate is of the total population of potentially eligible voters. We may think of that debate in terms of five issues: representativeness of candidate preferences, representativeness of partisan identification, ideological representativeness, demographic representativeness (i.e., race, age, and gender), and socio-economic representativeness. We have focused on the first of these, now we briefly review what is known about the other four.

3.1.1. *Partisan representativeness*

There is clear evidence that, in general, those who identify with the Democratic party are less likely to participate in the electoral process. This participatory gap widens as we move from the pool of people who are registered to those who come to the polls to those who vote for offices toward the end of the ticket. Moreover, the differences between Democratic identifiers and Republican identifiers in their likelihood of contributing to a campaign and with respect to other forms of election-related activism are far greater than the differences between party identifiers with respect to the simple act of voting (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995).

3.1.2. *Ideological representativeness*

While Burnham (1982: 189) argues that there is a pool of demobilized alienated citizens whose renewed interest in politics would, in ideological terms, substantially change the face of American politics, claims about the supposed alienation or radicalism of the non-voting electorate have been challenged by Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980), Bennett and Resnick (1990) and Texeira

(1992) among others. It is also well known that primary voters tend to be more ideologically extreme and more knowledgeable about politics than voters in general elections.

3.1.3. *Demographic representativeness*

If we turn away from the question of the partisan, ideological and attitudinal representativeness of the electorate to examine simply representativeness in terms of demographic attributes such as race, there is clear evidence that the electorate has been growing more representative. In particular, the gap between white and black turnout as a proportion of voting age population has narrowed dramatically since the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Alt, 1994). Moreover, there is not a gender gap in voting participation. As for age, a curvilinear link is well substantiated, with the youngest and the oldest segments of the population voting at lower levels than those in-between (Verba and Nye, 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).

3.1.4. *Socio-economic representatives*

Leighley and Nagler (1992) examined class biases in voter turnout and assert that such biases remained relatively stable across presidential elections from 1960–1988. They find that lower-class citizens vote at roughly 60% the rate of upper-class citizens.[17] Shields and Goidel (1997) find similar results of substantial class bias and rough constancy of that bias over time for congressional elections in the period 1958–1994.

3.2. *Turnout and Democratic success*

We began the paper by identifying various effects that can operate in countervailing directions: a **partisan bias effect** that makes nonvoters disproportionately Democratic in their partisan identification – giving rise to the expectation that increases in turnout *will benefit the Democrats*; a **bandwagon effect** that makes it likely that habitual nonvoters if they do go to the polls will vote similarly to core voters – giving rise to the expectation that turnout *may be unrelated to the success of Democrats*; and a **competition effect** that can make it likely that *high turnout elections are ones in which incumbents do poorly, regardless of party*. We then sought to distinguish among three questions that have almost always been confused in the literature on the linkage between turnout and Democratic success.

We now wish to briefly review what is known empirically about the answers to these three questions.

Even the first and easiest of these questions to answer, whether nonvoters are more Democratic in their voting preferences than are voters, is more complicated than it might first appear because the answer appears to have

changed with recent elections and may not be the same across different types of elections. Nonetheless, as we review the previous research evidence, we have concluded that the answer to the first question, "Are low turnout voters more likely to vote Democratic than high turnout voters?", has largely been settled, at least at the level of presidential voting. That answer has historically been YES (Miller and Wattenberg, 1982) but, in recent presidential elections, a bandwagon effect sweeping the less politically aware voters toward the winning candidate, combined with weakening Democratic party loyalties among lower income and education white voters, has made nonvoters marginally more Republican in candidate preference than voters (Texeira, 1992: 87; Gant and Lyons, 1993). Thus, at the presidential level, the present answer to that first question now appears to be NO.

With respect to the second question, although the previously published studies (e.g., DeNardo, 1980, 1986; Tucker and Vedlitz, 1986; Texeira, 1992; Radcliff, 1994) do not agree on the answer, in our view the answer to the second question: "Are elections with higher turnout higher in Democratic vote share?" is, in fact, generally NO, at least for congressional and legislative elections. For example, Grofman, Collet, and Griffin (1995) generated the correlations between change in turnout (among registrants) and change in Democratic vote share for each pair of California Assembly elections at time t and time t + 4 that take place within the same redistricting cycle.[18] Only one of the six pairs has an adjusted r^2 above .02, and that value is only .06. Thus, as expected, the results do not show Democratic gains when turnout goes up.[19]

With respect to the third question, "If turnout were to have increased in some given election, would Democrats have done better?", we believe, quite simply, that this question remains unanswered. In our view, none of the previous research on the link between turnout and Democratic success used a research design that would legitimately allow this question to be resolved. Instead, earlier empirical studied did not really address this critical third question, but answered questions one or two instead.[20]

A common denominator among the previous refutations of the alleged turnout-benefit to Democrats relationship using *individual* level data is the consideration of the preferences held by nonvoters. By showing through survey data that nonvoters hold essentially the same views as voters or that they have weaker partisan ties and would be motivated by short-term forces that would tend to favor the winner of the election, scholars have sought to eliminate any direct connection between turnout and outcomes. As Texeira (1992: 93) succinctly put it: "(M)ost existing electoral outcomes are fairly robust and not, in any meaningful sense, determined by relative turnout rates".

However, we must be careful not to overstate the implications of such findings. A major difficulty with this line of argument is that it implicitly assumes that additional turnout among nonvoters, if it were to occur, would mirror the mean characteristics of this group. Key (1958) points out that even if nonvoters tend to look like potential Democrats, the linkage between increased turnout and a boost in the Democratic share of the vote is still not certain. As we demonstrate in Section 2 of this paper, the answers to questions one and three are logically independent.

Similarly, when we look at the studies of the partisan consequences of turnout that have relied on *aggregate* data (DeNardo, 1980, 1986; Zimmer, 1985; Tucker and Vedlitz, 1986; Texeira, 1992; Radcliff, 1994), we find that they really address only the second question. But, even if turnout were higher in elections in which Democrats do better (and the available empirical evidence suggests that this is false), this would still not mean that increasing turnout in any given election would necessarily benefit the Democratic candidate. Positive correlations are irrelevant to the truth or falsity of any claim that Democrats are actually likely to undermine their chances by championing efforts to get more voters to the polls or seeking to register more low income voters.[21] The causal fallacy behind such a (wrong) conclusion is like that observed in the well-known story of lice in the New Hebrides. Lice are found in the hair of healthy people, but tend not to be found on the heads of the sick. It would be a big mistake, however, to assume that putting lice in someone's hair would make them healthy.[22]

3.3. *Turnout and electoral representativeness*

For the same kinds of reasons that we must be careful not to assume that increases in turnout will lead to increases in Democratic success,[23] we must also be careful not to assume that higher turnout will increase the overall representativeness of the electorate in the other ways that we have identified above. New voters are highly unlikely to be a random draw from the non-voting pool. For example, Brians and Grofman (forthcoming) show that when we reduce registration barriers by introducing election day registration, turnout does rise and the electorate does become somewhat more representative, but the new voters come disproportionately from the middle of the income and education distribution, rather than from the ranks of the lowest SES members of the citizenry who were also lowest in turnout.

4. Discussion

The view that higher turnout helps Democrats has been generalized to apply to the success of parties of the left. However, countries with strong left parties also usually have strong union movements, strong class-based politics, and strong incentives for political participation, including the adoption of rules such as two-day and weekend voting that facilitate political participation. Thus, high turnout may result from the same causes as left party strength.[24] Still, looking at turnout and national election results from nineteen long-term democracies in a pooled cross-sectional design over the period 1950–1995, Pacek and Radcliff (1995) find support for the claim that, as turnout within a nation rises, left of center parties gain a higher vote share.

But Pacek and Radcliff (1995) also find that the strength of the linkage varies from country to country, and tends to be least in those countries where class-based politics is least pronounced, among which countries the United States would be numbered. Similarly, of the three effects we have identified, the one which would tend to reinforce higher turnout helping the left party, the partisan bias effect, is stronger in most countries than in the United States; while one of the two effects that militate against a strong link between turnout and the success of the left party, the bandwagon effect, is apt to be much weaker. Lastly, what we have called the competition effect is likely to be largely irrelevant in countries using list PR rather than single member district plurality elections since, with list PR, incumbency-related effects are minimized. Thus, whatever may be the case for left parties in other countries, in the United States, we must be very careful in taking for granted that higher turnout will help the Democrats.

When there was an increase in turnout between 1988 and 1992, some thought this contributed to Clinton's success (cf. Knack, 1997). Yet, turnout fell between 1992 and 1996 and Clinton did even better.

Notes

1. Grofman, Collet, and Griffin (1995) refer to this as an "electoral tides" effect.
2. Fenton (1979) may be said to have anticipated the central idea of the "competition effect". However, the main emphasis of his article is elsewhere.
3. Note that here we are following Gary Cox (Cox and Munger, 1989; G. Cox, personal communication, 1995) in positing an elite-driven explanation for the observed link between turnout and competitiveness. If a race is likely to be close greater efforts will be devoted to getting out the vote. On the other hand, higher turnout may also occur because a perception that a race is close leads more voters to see their vote as potentially decisive – the standard Downsian argument as to why a link between turnout and closeness should exist. However, we are generally quite skeptical about the Downsian claim that turnout in any given election is closely tied to the likelihood of a voter perceiving himself/herself or decisive (Grofman,

1996; cf. Glazer and Grofman, 1992; Hanks and Grofman, forthcoming), and that is not the argument we have given for why a competition effect might be expected.

4. We wish to alert the reader to an important distinction between our terminology and that used by DeNardo (1980). What we call the "partisan bias" effect is what DeNardo refers to as the "composition" effect. (We do not use his terminology because "composition effect" is an even more apt term for a type of context effect we describe later in the paper – one that is related to partisan differences between high turnout and low turnout districts rather than between high turnout propensity and low turnout propensity potential voters.) However, DeNardo's "defection" effect is not the same as our "electoral tides" effect. DeNardo (1980: 418) argues that "peripheral voters are just as fickle inside the voting booth as they are about getting to it. These voters cross party lines more frequently than core regulars because their partisan attachments are weaker. As a result, the rates of defection in each camp increase with the level of turnout". In contrast, our electoral tides effect implies that the rate of defection among infrequent voters will be higher than that for frequent voters for supporters of only one party, the party suffering from an electoral tide running against it.
5. As we shall show, previous research has addressed one or the other of the first two questions, although some authors appear to have thought that in so doing they were answering this third question.
6. With proper care it might be possible to make use of ecological inference on aggregate data to address this question, but avoiding ecological fallacies would not be easy.
7. There are four types of methodology that has been used to investigate the link between turnout and Democratic vote share:

   (1) individual level comparisons of Democratic vote preference among individual eligible to vote in some given election (e.g., the presidency) as a function of whether or not they voted (Texeira, 1992), or how likely they were to vote (e.g., Miller and Wattenberg, 1982);
   (2) aggregate pooled data comparisons for a particular type of office (e.g., president) of the Democratic share of the vote *versus* turnout for each election in some set of elections (DeNardo, 1980);
   (3) aggregate level cross-sectional comparisons of turnout and Democratic vote share across different constituencies within a single election (e.g., analysis of variations in Democratic votes for president as a function of state-level differences in turnout: Tucker and Vedlitz, 1986); and
   (4) aggregate cross-sectional or pooled data comparisons of Democratic vote shares *versus* turnout among elections of a particular type across different sets of constituencies grouped according to partisan leaning (e.g., contests for the presidency or House in a given year or set of years in constituencies grouped according to party registration or previous voting behavior: DeNardo, 1980; Radcliff, 1994, 1995; Erikson, 1995a, b).

8. Absent such data, we might, however, be able to make some useful inferences about how higher turnout might have affected election outcomes through longitudinal analysis of individual level survey data.
9. "Democratic candidates would have been strengthened, at least in recent decades, by compulsory voting or by some other means of bringing out substantially the entire electorate. Analysis after analysis has shown a higher preference for the Democratic cause among those who stayed away from the polls than among those who votes.. . . [But] the fact that Democrats are less inclined to take themselves to the polls than Republicans does not mean that an increase in the total turnout will be accompanied invariably by an increase in the Democratic proportion of the vote. If at one election the turnout is 55% of the potential vote and at the next 60%, the effect of the increase on the partisan division will depend in part upon the sectors of the population from which the increment in vote comes" (Key, 1958: 637).

10. We might have chosen a nonlinear specification of f and g that would "automatically" stay within the [0,1] range, but the loss in mathematical tractability would be considerable. The linear functional forms allow us to illustrate the points we wish to make in a reasonably intuitive fashion, without loss to the substance of the argument.
11. Since we have posited that $\partial \mathbf{g}/\partial \mathbf{v} < 0$ and $\partial \mathbf{f}/\partial \mathbf{v} > 0$, it is easy to see that we must have $\partial \mathbf{f}/\partial \mathbf{g} < 0$, since
$$\partial \mathbf{f}/\partial \mathbf{g} = (\partial \mathbf{f}/\partial \mathbf{v}) \cdot (\partial \mathbf{v}/\partial \mathbf{g}) = \mathbf{r}/(-\mathbf{m})$$
12. However, if r equals zero, then Democratic vote share is, of course, unaffected by a change in turnout.
13. Line 1c is obtained by multiplying the values of m and b for the baseline case by a constant (here the constant is 2). It is easy to see that such a uniform proportional increase in turnout must, under the assumptions specified previously, leave Democratic vote share unchanged, since
$$\mathrm{b}(\partial \mathbf{h}/\partial \mathbf{b}) + \mathrm{m}(\partial \mathbf{h}/\partial \mathbf{m}) = 0.$$
14. The reader should also note that turnout goes up when we shift from the equation of column 3 to that of column 10 or from the equation of column 4 to that of column 8 for *every* value of v between 0 and 1.
15. In writing h(v) in terms of a function that involves the product of f(v) and g(v) we were implicitly assuming that g(v) and h(v) are not interdependent, i.e., that changes in turnout do not affect partisan propensities and *vice versa*. This is a useful simplification for voting behavior within a single election but less appropriate for considering voting change across elections.
16. Similarly, even if most nonvoters are more Republican in their leanings than voters, this does not imply that lower turnout will be associated with Democratic success.
17. This is a rate considerably below the relative turnout level of lower class voters in other western democracies (Powell, 1980).
18. They compare elections at four year intervals to avoid the need to take into account turnout differences between mid years and presidential years.
19. Looking across elections, the competition effect leads us, instead, to expect to find major changes in turnout correlated with lowered vote shares for incumbents, *regardless of party*. Other data from the California General Assembly analyzed in Grofman, Collet, and Griffin (1995) supports this expectation.
20. Grofman, Collet, and Griffin (1995) also show that there are important methodological problems in many of the aggregate research methods that have been used in previous studies of the link between turnout and Democratic success. In particular, contextual effects of various kinds can give rise to spurious (and often negative) correlations between turnout and the success of Democratic candidates (cf. Cox, 1988).
21. Although DeNardo's (1980) bookkeeping equations correctly represent the mathematical identities that summarize each party's share of the vote as a function of support rates from the partisan core and rates of partisan defection from peripheral voters, weighted by the relative sizes of the core and the periphery, what is lacking is any model of dynamics. Neither the theoretical or empirical analyses found in DeNardo's (1980, 1986) support DeNardo's claim that "a heavy turnout normally **helps** the minority party" (1980: 1301, boldface added). Positive constituency level or election level correlations between turnout and Democratic vote share simply do not answer the question of whether or not higher turnout benefits Democrats in the *causal sense* that Democrats would have benefited by reduced voter turnout in some particular election.
22. In like manner, although consistently negative correlations between Democratic vote shares and turnout across elections or across constituencies might tempt us to conclude that higher turnout actually hurts Democrats rather than helps them, and consistently negative correlations between incumbent vote shares and turnout might tempt us to conclude that higher turnout simply hurts incumbents, we must beware of causal fallacies. Indeed, if we regress turnout on Democratic vote share across some set of legislative districts we are

very likely to get negative correlations between Democratic success and turnout generated by an ecological effect in which high turnout units are disproportionately Republican in character (Grofman, Collet, and Griffin, forthcoming). For example, for House elections in 1992, the district-level correlation between raw turnout and Democratic share of the two-party House vote in the district is negative. The regression equation is shown below, with t statistics shown in parentheses.

$$\begin{array}{rl} \text{DEMVOTESHARE} = & .854 - .0000143\text{TURNOUT} \\ & (20.67) \quad (-7.62) \end{array}$$

Yet, this negative cross-sectional correlation in no way should be taken to mean that increasing the size of the electorate in some particular district would *ipso facto* change outcomes in that district so as to make things worse for Democrats.

23. For example, Republicans were frightened that easing registration laws by permitting voting registration at the same time as registering for a driver's license would have an inherent bias toward the Democrats. Using county level data from Michigan, Calvert (1996) shows that there was no statistically significant relationship between Democratic vote share and the proportion of voters in the county who registered via the DMV when other factors were controlled for, suggesting that new registrants were not in fact disproportionately Democratic in their voting propensities.
24. In this context it is interesting to note the findings of Hill and Leighley (1996) that, at the state level, the more liberal and competitive the Democratic party in a state, the greater the mobilization of lower-class voters.

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