

RESEARCH NOTE

WHY DEMOCRATS SHOULDN'T VOTE (with acknowledgements to R. Erikson)

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ABSTRACT

Controversy persists over the link between turnout and the likelihood of success of Democratic candidates. To the surprise of practically everyone, we present clear and compelling evidence that higher turnout (and possibly even higher registration) actually benefit the Republicans.

KEY WORDS • Democrats • Republicans • turnout

Controversy persists over the link between turnout and the likelihood of success of Democratic candidates, with the common wisdom being that higher turnout helps Democrats (e.g. Burnham, 1965, 1982; Tucker and Vedlitz, 1986; Piven and Cloward, 1988; Radcliff, 1994), but some arguing that voters and non-voters are not really that different from one another in their partisan preferences (Texeira, 1992), and some arguing that high turnout is actually likely to help the minority party, whichever party that may happen to be (DeNardo, 1980, 1986; Grofman et al., 1995). Contrary to everything ever written on this topic, we provide conclusive evidence that higher turnout actually benefits Republicans, and preliminary evidence that the same is true for higher registration.

We look at several different data sets, beginning with data on elections to the California Assembly.

We first regress turnout proportion among registrants on Democratic vote share (percentage) for the 80 districts in the California Assembly, in each of the elections over the 1962–92 period. Results are shown in Table 1.

All the correlations in Table 1 are negative, and all results are statistically significant.

Next, we look at state-level data for US Senatorial elections pooled for the years 1950–90. The correlation between Democratic vote share and turnout

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Table 1. Correlations Between Democratic Vote Share and Turnout as a Proportion of Registration: California Assembly, 1966–90*

Year	Correlation
1966	-.54
1968	-.34
1970	-.46
1972	-.44
1974	-.62
1976	-.42
1978	-.58
1980	-.64
1982	-.19
1984	-.65
1986	-.28
1988	-.67
1990	-.61

* All values are statistically significant at least the .01 level.

among (estimated)¹ voting age population is again negative, $-.44$, and statistically significant.

Next, we compare national election year net Democratic House seat gains and losses with pooled national level turnout from 1950 to 1992. We again obtain negative correlations: $-.15$ in presidential years, and $-.34$ in off-years.² When we do analysis for recent individual years using state-level data, the same pattern appears: the higher the ratio of turnout to voting age population, the less well the Democratic presidential candidate does. For example, in 1992, the correlation between Clinton's statewide vote share percentage and percentage turnout among voting age population in the state is $-.32$ ($p = .02$), with a regression line of $-.185\text{TURNOUT}\% + 55.3$.

Finally, when we examine registration levels rather than turnout among registrants or turnout among eligibles, we obtain similar results: the higher the registration as a percentage of voting age eligibles, the less well Democratic presidential candidates do: the correlation is $-.42$ ($p < .01$), with a regression line of $-.301\text{REG}\% + 59.2$.

Discussion

The data we have presented show conclusively that, for legislative elections in the US House, the US Senate and the California Assembly, and for presidential elec-

1. We use a straight line projection to interpolate voting age population in non-census years.

2. National level turnout figures are estimates by Burnham (1987) and Teixeira (1992). The first of the two correlations reported above does not reach statistical significance.

tions, the higher the turnout in the contest the less well Democrats do. *Since higher turnout has been shown to benefit Republicans, it is obvious that voters sympathetic to the Democratic cause should stay home.* Indeed, while less definitive on this point, our work on the link in 1992 between registration levels (relative to eligibles) and Democratic presidential success strongly suggests that Democrats should not register, either.

Our work is in a recent tradition of paradoxical findings that are derived from what Alec Stone (1995) has aptly called the 'Wuffeauldian' research paradigm of 'post-rationalist' theory. Key works in this tradition include Wuffle (1992), which shows that it is easier to find your way around if you do not have a map; Wuffle (1984) which accounts for class bias in voting by showing that only people who find it rational to brush their teeth should also find it rational to bother to vote; and Wuffle (1988), which shows that voters who do vote will often find it optimal to support candidates that they do not *wish* to see elected – a result extended by Erikson (1989), who shows that Democrats should not vote for Democratic nominees for President lest such candidates actually win.³ We believe that the findings in this brief research note further significantly advance the Wuffeauldian program of revealing the fallacies of rational choice modeling, quantitative analysis and anything not written in French.

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3. Some might interpret Erikson's (1990) analysis as being in the rational choice tradition because he notes that subsequent midterm losses might cost the Democrats control of Congress but, since Downs (1957) posits that each election is entire unto itself and that voters have no foresight, this would make Erikson a heretic.

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