Do private donations depress electoral turnout? An empirical investigation of voter participation

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the hypothesis that the increasing reliance of political parties and candidates on certain types of private donations could be one of the key factors behind declining voter turnout, even in established and consolidated democratic regimes. To disentangle this relationship, it highlights seven institutional arrangements that are likely to limit the extent to which private actors can make political contributions. The empirical analysis demonstrates that, while certain regulations indeed lead to higher voter participation, the relationship is nuanced. For example, bans to corporate donations improve turnout only when they prevent companies with government ties from donating money. In addition, what seems to bolster voter participation greatly is limiting the amount a private donor can contribute, as well as requiring parties and candidates to reveal the identity of their donors. The analysis also demonstrates that voter confidence in the government is one plausible causal mechanism linking finance regulations and turnout. Depending on the particular regulation adopted, turnout can be boosted between 3.4 and 8.6 percent.

1. Introduction

What are the determinants of voter turnout around the world? As illustrated by Fig. 1, the propensity of voters to cast a ballot varies greatly. Citizen participation is perhaps unsurprisingly non-existent in authoritarian countries like Brunei, North Korea, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and China. In other countries, about two-thirds of eligible voters cast a ballot. This group of states includes established democracies like Austria, Australia, Denmark, Sweden and Belgium, some of which have compulsory voting. But it also includes states like Belarus, Cuba, Syria and Uzbekistan, where robust citizen participation in rigged elections reasserts authoritarian dominance under a veneer of forced legitimacy. Within the advanced capitalist democratic world, the United States consistently falls behind its neighbor Canada. Among more recent democratizers, Poland enjoys much lower voter participation than Albania or Bulgaria.

In addition to the cross-sectional variation illustrated above, voter turnout has been declining over time. According to data collected by the Comparative Political Dataset (CPD), voter turnout in 38 consolidated democracies in North America and Europe has declined by an annual average of 0.33% since 1960. This trend has been most pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe, where annual declines have fluctuated between 1 and 2 percent since the initial post-1989 spikes. Among the established Western democracies, voter turnout has deteriorated the most in Portugal (by about 1 percent). Average year-on-year turnout has increased in only three countries in the period covered by the dataset: Denmark, Malta, and Poland.

This paper advances an institutional explanation of turnout by illuminating the role that regulations of private donations for campaign purposes play. While many existing studies of why people show up at the polls exist, the relationship between political finance and turnout is rarely studied systematically using cross-national data, with one notable exception (Norris and Van Es, 2016). We seek to contribute to this research agenda. We argue that an influx of large campaign contributions by corporations and powerful individuals could undermine voter trust in the democratic process and could lead to a decline in their propensity to cast a ballot on Election Day. The institutional regulations that make this possible can be classified in three broad categories that serve as our theoretical causal mechanisms. The first features institutional arrangements that make it possible for powerful private actors to make legal monetary contributions to parties and candidates in the first place. The second involves formal rules that fail to place limits on the size of such private donations, thereby allowing powerful private actors to have a disproportionate influence on politics, relative to private citizens. The final incorporates transparency regulations that make it likely that interactions between private and political entrepreneurs will become known to the general public.

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2. Existing explanations of voter turnout

The vast differences in voter turnout across countries and over time present a long-standing puzzle: Why would citizens in some countries take full advantage of democratic opportunities and freedoms, while voters in others prefer to not be politically engaged? Existing explanations vary greatly, both in terms of the level of analysis and with respect to the types of explanations that they offer.

A large share of the explanations of voter turnout focuses on micro-level factors. According to some, a single ballot is unlikely to change the outcome of the election and voting is therefore simply irrational (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). Other individual-level explanations focus on the role of political disillusionment (Dalton, 2009), age (Putnam, 2000, 1995), civic engagement (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1994), level of education (Gallego, 2010; Lipset, 1960), as well as employment status and income level (Nie and Verba, 1975). We rely heavily on the literature that links political trust with turnout. A number of recent studies suggest positive association between the two (Grönlund and Setälä, 2007; Hadjar and Beck, 2010; Hooghe et al., 2011), even though the opposite claim has also been made (Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2014).

Macro-level causes of voter turnout have been thoroughly reviewed elsewhere (Blais, 2006; Cancela and Geys, 2016; Geys, 2006). The first is population size, hypothesized to diminish the likelihood that a single vote will change the outcome of an election, making rational individuals less likely to vote (Mueller, 2003; Owen and Grofman, 1984). Second, ethno-cultural diversity is theorized to decrease group cohesion, leading to lower rates of voter turnout according to some (Cohen, 1982), even though the opposite argument is also evident in the literature (Zimmer, 1976). Economic causes of turnout are also prominent and include inequality (Arzheimer, 2008), unemployment and human development (Martins and Veiga, 2013; Pacek and Radcliff, 2008).

Political explanations are the last category of existing scholarship reviewed here. Perhaps the most logical determinant of voter turnout is whether or not a country is a democracy (Kostadinova and Power, 2007) and whether it regularly holds high-quality and competitive elections (Birch, 2010). Others have focused on the role of particular democratic formal rules, such as the ballot structure (Gallego et al., 2012; Sanz, 2015); electoral formula proportionality (Blais, 2006; Gallego et al., 2012; Geys, 2006); district magnitude (Jacobs and Spierings, 2010); bicameralism, compulsory voting and concurrent elections (Barnes and Rangel, 2014; Fornos et al., 2004); decentralization (Blais et al., 2011) and the number of veto players (Carlin and Love, 2013).

According to perhaps the most comprehensive study on the subject, voter turnout is determined by the combination of demographic and political causes (Franklin, 2004). Voting age is a powerful predictor of turnout levels.1 Other key causes of turnout include the fractionalization of party systems, itself a byproduct of the electoral system. Franklin finds that more fractionalized systems (which typically employ proportional representation and a large district magnitude) experience lower levels of turnout (Franklin, 2004, 214). Another powerful predictor of turnout is the margin of majority, as well as the size of the population (Franklin, 2004, 215).

3. Private funding and voter turnout: a theory

3.1. Existing scholarship

This paper builds on existing scholarship that links political institutions to voter turnout by focusing on the regulations of party funding. Some pre-existing arguments do entertain the idea that the two might be linked: if voters believe that private money dominates the political process, turnout will decrease (Shockley, 1985). More recent social scientific research, based on evidence from the United States, provides more empirical rigor and suggests that access to “soft money” might empower state-level party grassroots structures to revitalize neglected turnout operations (La Raja, 2008). This view challenges earlier work that claims that campaign finance regulations are irrelevant (Primo and Milyo, 2004).

The comparative literature on the link between campaign finance

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1 Our analysis does not include voting age. Currently, the vast majority of countries around the world have voting age limits set at 18 or 19, with a few exceptions at 16. Franklin’s analysis is over time and therefore captures the impact of this institution when it underwent more substantial variation than it does currently. While Franklin’s work is impressive in its theorizing and analysis of changes over time, this limits his sample of countries to 21.
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