Abstract

Sparked both by normative concerns and a classic empirical puzzle, scholars developed and tested a variety of explanations for the turnout decline in the US between 1960 and 1988. More than a decade of research eventually showed that the sources of the decline in turnout were multifaceted: it stemmed in various degrees from declines in partisanship, political efficacy and newspaper reading, mobilization, and changes in the age distribution in the electorate with lower rates of participation in younger cohorts.

Turnout slid to 52.8% of the voting eligible population in 1992, surged briefly in 1992 to 58.1%, then bottomed out at 51.7% in 1996. Since then, turnout increased in three consecutive presidential elections, reaching an estimated 61.4% in 2008, but dropped back to 58.2% in 2012. Using pooled cross-sectional data from the American National Election Studies, I find that demographic and electoral reform variables account for little of the increase in turnout since 1996, while perceptions of partisan differences and renewed importance of voter mobilization do account for substantial portions of the increase.
The titles on the bookshelf of a typical scholar of American political participation can be downright depressing: *The Disappearing American Voter, The Demobilization of American Voters, The Vanishing Voter, The Empty Polling Booth, Nonvoters,* and *Why Americans Don’t Vote* (Avey 1989; Doppelt and Shearer 1999; Hadley, Steeper, and Swayze 1978; Patterson 2002; Piven and Cloward 1988; Teixeira 1992) all share shelf space with two different works whose common title asks *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Ladd 1982; Wattenberg 2002) The precipitous decline in voter participation from the 1960s through the 1990s shown in Figure 1 sparked concern among public officials, media commentators, and public intellectuals, and was especially puzzling given that the combination of more open access to education and liberalized voter registration laws in this period should have made it easier for people to acquire the information they needed to make a decision and act on it in the voting booth. (Brody 1978) Two decades of research eventually showed that the sources of the decline in turnout were multifaceted, stemming in various degrees from declines in partisanship (Cassel and Hill 1981; Shaffer 1981), political efficacy and newspaper reading (Teixeira 1992), mobilization (Gerber and Green 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), and changes in the age distribution in the electorate (Boyd 1981) with lower rates of participation in younger cohorts (Lyons and Alexander 2000; Miller 1992), though none of these explanations fully solved Brody’s original puzzle. A recalibration that excluded growing numbers of ineligible noncitizens and disenfranchised felons from turnout calculations significantly reduced the amount of the decline that required explanation (McDonald and Popkin 2001), but did not eliminate it altogether. Turnout surges in the presidential elections of 1984 and 1992 provided temporary hope that the hemorrhaging had stopped, but they were followed by even more dramatic ebbs in participation
in 1988 and 1996. Voters had not entirely vanished, but commentators who regarded voter turnout as a thermometer measuring the health of American democracy were clearly worried.

In a rather stunning turnaround, the participation of the eligible voter population has sharply increased over three of the last four U.S. presidential elections. Turnout went up 2.5% in the election of 2000, 5.9% in 2004, and another 1.6% in 2008 to reach 61.7% of the voter eligible population, the highest rate in forty years, before dropping 3.5% in 2012, back to 58.2%.¹ The increase between 2000 and 2004 was larger than any single decline between consecutive presidential elections since 1952, except for the 8.0% fall after the anomalous first “Perot” election of 1992. Between 1996 and 2008, the turnout rate in presidential elections has “recovered” over four-fifths of the decline from the post-World War II high of 63.8% in 1960 to the nadir of 51.7% in President Clinton’s reelection of 1996, and even after a slight ebb, turnout in 2012 remained higher than it had been at any time between 1972 and 2000. After two decades of handwringing and wondering “where have all the voters gone?”, the American voter is resurgent, at least for now. But, why?

Understanding the sources of the recent increase in turnout is not only significant in its own right and in assessing whether the reversal of fortune can be sustained, but it will also offer a check on the robustness of explanations of the earlier turnout decline. If shifts in citizens’ attitudes (such as partisanship) really caused the fall of turnout, we should see a turnaround in those attitudes concomitant with the latest surge in voter participation. Or if the decline in turnout was mostly attributable to the decline in voter mobilization, we should see evidence of a resumption of contacting that accounts for the latest increase in voter participation. In short, a
robust explanation of trends in voter participation should account for both the downturn and the rebound in turnout.

In the remainder of this paper, I review the major explanations for the decline in turnout in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. I then outline an approach in determining the sources of the recent increase in voter participation, and discuss how applications of that approach help to provide insights into the role that changes in social composition of the potential electorate, attitudes about parties, contact with parties and campaigns, and electoral laws have played in the resurgence of turnout in the United States. I conclude with observations about the compatibility between my explanation of the turnout surge with explanations of the previous turnout decline, and offer suggestions for future research.

Turnout Decline and the Puzzle of Participation

Electoral Laws

In posing the “puzzle of participation,” Brody (1978) observed that the decline in turnout from 1960 to 1976 had occurred precisely when changes in the legal context were making registration and voting substantially easier. A combination of various Supreme Court decisions, the 24th Amendment, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were successful in untangling the Southern web of intimidation, discriminatory administrative discretion, and state laws that had been designed to evade the 15th Amendment, as Southern turnout increased among both blacks and whites. (Stanley 1987) But apparently there were no spillover effects in other parts of the country, where voter participation declined precipitously. In short, turnout was declining while courts, states, and Congress were in the process of making it easier to vote. (Teixeira 1992, 29-30)
In their comprehensive analysis of the decline in turnout, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) estimate that the liberalization of voter registration (through the abolition of literacy tests and poll taxes, the near abolition of the requirement to periodically re-register, as well as later closing dates) helped to abate the decline in participation between the 1960s and 1980s. If citizens of the 1980s had faced the registration hurdles present in the early 1960s, Rosenstone and Hansen estimate that turnout would have been 1.8% lower than it actually was.

**Demographics**

Turnout decline in spite of liberalized voter registration was especially puzzling because rising levels of education would have been expected to increase most citizens’ capacities for understanding the political choices of the day, as well as in navigating the remaining administrative requirements for registration and casting a ballot. Older cohorts who had had more limited opportunities for higher education were being replaced by younger cohorts who were taking advantage of the democratization of educational opportunity, but failing to translate those skills into votes. Brody surmised that “the demographic changes in the electorate, to the extent they relate to turnout, on balance would lead us to expect higher rather than lower rates of participation.” (1978, 299)

The passing of time exacerbated Brody’s puzzle. Two major works that analyzed ANES and Census data from 1960 to 1988 showed that the turnout decline persisted in the face of continuing changes in demography that should have been correlated with higher turnout. (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Teixeira 1992) Most importantly, the proportion of Americans who had at least tried college continued to grow, which, with the strong relationship between education and voting, would have been expected to result in a 1988 turnout rate about 2.8 points
higher than the 1960 rate, ceteris paribus. (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 214-215; Teixeira 1992, 36) Moreover, family income increased and more women were electing to work outside the home (Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1999), which combined with changes in the distribution of education, should have resulted in a total SES adjusted turnout rate 3.9 points higher than the 1960 post-War peak. (Teixeira 1992, 36) On the other hand, there were some social trends in the population during this period that helped account for lower turnout. Americans were younger and fewer of them were married and regular church attenders in 1988 compared to 1960, but the net effect of those variables and SES in a comprehensive model would still have lead us to expect higher turnout at the end of this period. In short, demographics did not do a good job of explaining the decline in turnout from 1960-1988.

Perceptions of closeness

In the simple version of rational choice theory, people should be slightly more likely to vote when they believe that an election is going to be close, or with higher levels of \( p \) in the classic calculus of voting (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Empirical support for this prediction has been decidedly mixed, and eyeballing the aggregate decline in turnout from the 1960s to the 1990s does not inspire much confidence. Both nail-biters and landslides were predicted (and occurred) in both relatively high turnout years (the presidential election in 1960 was breathtakingly close, 1964 wasn’t) and low turnout years (1976 was also very close, 1984 wasn’t). Grofman (1993) suggests that these and other mixed or null findings occur, in part, because of neglect of other exogenous variables or electoral contexts that might affect both perceived closeness and expected turnout,\(^2\) and too short of a time frame.
Looking over a broader time frame and a wider space, Franklin (2004) found that an increase in non-competitive elections did contribute to a general decline in turnout in Western democracies (including but not limited to the United States) from 1945 to 1999 through a rolling cohort effect. Franklin argues that young people are particularly responsive to the structural conditions at the time of their initiation into the electoral system, so they are less likely to vote if elections are routine, not salient, and uncompetitive as they reach adulthood and the age of suffrage. Having missed the opportunity to develop the habit of voting early (Plutzer 2002), these cohorts affect aggregate level turnout for years, until they are ultimately replaced by a generation socialized during an environment more conducive to participation. Thus, while perceptions of closeness are not strongly correlated with turnout in the short term, the long term effects can be substantial.

Parties

Party identification was about to reach its nadir when Brody posed his puzzle (Wattenberg 1998), suggesting a possible link between the concomitant declines in turnout and partisanship. Early analyses found that the partisan dealignment could explain between 25% and 30% of the decline in turnout in presidential elections between 1960 and 1980 (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Shaffer 1981), though critics argued that the omission of consideration of covariates, especially education, inflated the estimate of the impact of changes in partisanship on turnout in those models (Cassel and Luskin 1988). Later analyses based on more comprehensive models over a longer time span showed that changing attitudes about the two major parties did have an impact on the turnout decline, but the overall effect was rather modest due to a rather stable trend in the number of pure independents and an increase in the proportion of people who saw differences between the two major parties. (Teixeira 1992, 40-42)
Mobilization

None of the usual demographic or attitudinal variables, or any combination of them, resolved Brody’s puzzle of the decline in participation fully. Americans were somewhat less partisan and more “individualist” in the 1970s (Tom Wolfe’s “me” decade) and in the 1980s than they had been in the 1960s, but the net effects of those variables explained less than half of the decline between 1960 and 1988 (Teixeira 1992, 46-50). Lower levels of political interest and efficacy added much to the explanation of turnout decline in a statistical sense, but in another sense, those variables are almost too close to the dependent variable (the “tip of the funnel”) to be very interesting theoretically.

Rosenstone and Hansen’s (1993) analysis shifted the focus of responsibility for the decline in participation away from the individual and toward campaigns and linkage groups. As the increasing usage and costs of “air wars” (electronic media) and primary elections claimed more and more resources from political campaigns and interest groups, the resources available for “ground wars” (mobilization) in the general election dwindled. As a result, contacting by parties in presidential election years peaked in 1972 and then began to drop sharply over the next two decades. Moreover, partisan contacting was increasingly limited to the “right people,” those who have characteristics that already predispose them to vote (strong partisans, people in strong social networks, well-educated, and wealthy). Rosenstone and Hansen’s “Solving the Puzzle of Participation in Electoral Politics” chapter (1993, 211-227) attributed over half of the decline in turnout to the weakening efforts to mobilize citizens to vote. Moreover, this general explanation is supported by evidence from a growing number of field experiments that show significant effects of contacting on turnout in a variety of electoral contexts. (Gerber and Green 2000; Green and Gerber 2008; Middleton and Green 2008; Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006)
Data and Method

My analysis begins by recognizing two necessary conditions that must be met before we can conclude that some factor shares some of the credit for the recent surge in voter turnout. First, the factor must be correlated with voter turnout, and second, its distribution must have changed in the direction associated with greater voter turnout over the period of interest. The first condition suggests a fairly large number of demographic, attitudinal, and social and legal contextual variables that should be included in a comprehensive model of turnout, but as I will show, not all of those variables’ distributions changed, or changed in the direction that would account for the observed higher levels of turnout.

The analysis also depends on the availability of a dataset that has longitudinal observations of both turnout and the possible explanatory variables. The Census Bureau’s Voter Supplement Files are by far the largest survey samples that contain indicators of voter turnout and can provide very precise estimates of some demographic differences in turnout (Leighley and Nagler 1992; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), but their suitability for this purpose is undermined by the lack of indicators of political attitudes and interactions with campaigns that might account for the increase in turnout. Fortunately, the American National Election Studies series includes measures of many of those variables over time, a virtue that made it the source data for most of the scholarly analyses of turnout decline. Since 1948, ANES has asked large national samples of Americans about their participation and vote choices, as well as questions about their attitudes toward political campaigns, candidates, parties, and issues. In this study, I
merged data from the ANES Cumulative File for the presidential election years between 1996 and 2008 (inclusive) with data from the 2012 American National Election Study.\textsuperscript{4}

While the continuity of the time series makes ANES an invaluable resource for longitudinal analyses such as this one, it does have limitations. First, as in all surveys, the proportion of the population that reports voting is higher than the proportion of the eligible population that actually cast votes. This result occurs due to a combination of differences between voters and nonvoters in accessibility and agreeing to participate in the survey in the first place (Burden 2000), agreeing to be re-interviewed in the post-election survey (Bartels 2000a), and answering the turnout question truthfully (Abramson and Claggett 1984; Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2000; Cassel 2003), as well as the conditioning effect of the pre-election survey’s stimulus on political interest and participation among some respondents who otherwise would have likely abstained (Bartels 2000a). Assuming that “over-reporters” are similar to voters, and that the nonvoters who participated in the ANES surveys are much like those who did not, I calculated and applied a secondary weight that results in the reported turnout in each presidential election year being equal to the actual VEP turnout rate.\textsuperscript{5}

Second, ANES must continually balance the value of consistency in repeating the same questions year after year against the value of improvements in measurement, which has resulted in question wording changes in measures of some of the key concepts, including voter participation itself. (Duff \textit{et al.} 2007) In some cases, question wording changes can be accommodated by some careful recoding or preliminary analyses that suggest that changes were benign with respect to this kind of analysis. But in other cases, significant changes in the survey meant that only half-samples in some years could be used (as the party differences question was
asked on only form in 1996), and in others, non-comparability in measurement of a given variable precluded estimating its effects on turnout over multiple points in time.

Third, in 2012, ANES greatly expanded its sample size by including a large number of internet only respondents, in addition to those interviewed face-to-face. Preliminary results on some key variables, including turnout, suggest that the mode of the interview could have a substantial effect on the distribution of responses. As a conservative strategy, I chose to include only the face-to-face respondents in 2012.

Finally, like most survey data, the ANES studies are replete with missing data due to item non-response, or varying numbers of respondents opting out of providing answers to particular questions. As an alternative to listwise deletion that can distort estimations in multivariate analyses (King et al. 2001), I used multiple imputation of missing data to produce five replicate datasets, and the results below are based on averages of the analyses of those replicates. (Van Buuren and Oudshoorn 1999)

Estimation of a Comprehensive Model

Because turnout in US presidential elections was at its modern minimum in 1996, I choose that year to serve as the baseline for this analysis of the sources of the turnout increase. I first estimate a comprehensive logit model of voter turnout using the pooled cross-sectional data from the 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 American National Election Studies, and evaluate that model by calculating the expected turnout of the 1996 sample if it had had the characteristics of the samples in later election years. The explanatory variables include demographics (categories of education, age, church attendance, and employment status, and dummy variables for married/partnered, homeownership, and being in a union household), partisan attitudes
(categories of partisan strength and perceptions of party differences), perceptions of election closeness, mobilization variables (contact by parties, contact by other, and an interaction between the two), electoral laws (dummies for the presence of election day registration, no-fault absentee voting, and early voting in the state in which the respondent resides), and dummy variables for year (omitting the 1996 baseline year). The model is successful to the degree that it produces a simulated 1996 electorate that matches the higher turnout rates in later years.\textsuperscript{6}

Table 1 shows the estimated logit model of self-reported voter turnout in the presidential elections between 1996 and 2012, inclusive, based on multiple imputation of the pooled ANES time-series data and weights that were readjusted to reflect the actual VEP turnout rates in each election. By and large, the coefficients in the model behave as expected. The coefficients for the dummy year variables are statistically unreliable, which is our first indication that the substantive variables in the model are accounting for much of the observed surge in turnout over the period from 1996 through 2012.\textsuperscript{7} Not surprisingly, there are significant increases in turnout corresponding to each step up in education, and the likelihood of voting increases with each age category after age 39. Regular church attenders (those who attend at least once or twice a month) are also more likely to vote than infrequent and non-attenders, \textit{ceteris paribus}, and people who are married (or partnered), own their own homes, and live in a union household are also more likely to vote than singles, renters, and non-union household members. Although employment status does not reliably affect turnout (controlling for other variables in this model), these results are mostly consistent with previous findings that better educated, older, and more socially connected people are more likely to vote.

Table 1 about here
Also as expected, strength of partisanship and perceptions of party differences are strongly related to turnout. Pure independents (the omitted partisan category in the model) are significantly less likely to have voted than others, and the increasing size of the coefficients from leaner to weak partisan to strong partisan indicate that turnout increases with each step up in partisan strength. Those who do not see important differences between the parties (the omitted category in the model) are also less likely to vote than those who do, though somewhat surprisingly, more likely to vote than who don’t know if there are differences. Consistent with the classic rational choice model (Riker and Ordeshook 1968), those who expect the presidential election to be close are more likely to vote than those who do not. Being contacted during the campaign has expected positive effects on the likelihood of voting, though party contacting has a larger effect than non-party contacting, and the effects of party and non-party contacting are not additive (as indicated by the significant, negative coefficient on the contacting interaction term). Also consistent with prior research (Berinsky 2005; Gronke et al. 2008), living in a state with Election Day Registration has positive and significant effects on the likelihood of voting, but living in a state with convenience voting (early voting or no-fault absentee voting) does not. In sum and mostly as expected, turnout in this period was higher among stronger partisans, those who perceived differences between the parties, those who expected a close election, those who were contacted during the campaign, and those who lived in states with Election Day Registration.

We can see how much of the turnout increase from 1996 to 2012 might be attributable to changes in the distribution of the variables included in the model by using the estimated coefficients in Table 1 to derive predicted probabilities of voting under hypothetical conditions. Specifically, using these estimated coefficients, I estimate what the 1996 turnout rate would have
been if the actual distributions of all of the explanatory variables had been as they were in each year later in the time series.⁸ Those estimates are shown in Figure 2. Based on the coefficients in Table 1, I estimate that if the population in 1996 had the demographic, partisan, closeness, mobilization, and legal context characteristics present in 2000, the VEP turnout rate would have been 55.0% (in comparison to the actual VEP turnout rate of 54.2%). In other words, the comprehensive model in Table 1 accounts for all of the increase in turnout (and then some) from 1996 to 2000. The model also accounts for 89% of the substantial increase in turnout from 1996 to 2004, as I estimate that if conditions in 1996 had been what they were in 2004, turnout would have been 59.2% (less than a point short of the actual turnout of 61.7%). While the model accounts for most of the largest turnout surge (to 2004), it does not do quite as well with respect to the bump in 2008 or the pullback in 2012. The model estimates that turnout would have been basically flat from 2004 to 2008, with a slight increase to 59.5% in 2012. Viewed from the perspective of the increase from the baseline year, the model accounts for 75% of the increase in turnout from 1996 to 2008, and overshoots the 2012 actual turnout rate by 20%.

While the comprehensive model provides a reasonably good explanation of the increase in turnout from 1996 to 2012, we can also estimate the contribution of a group of variables to the overall explanation. To do so, I re-estimate a nested model excluding the variables of interest, and estimate the simulated turnout rates using the nested model. I then compare the predictions of the comprehensive model to the nested model; any difference is the effect of the variables omitted in the nested model.

Demographics and Voter Turnout, 1996-2012
Figure 3 shows the simulated turnout rates based on a model that excludes the demographic variables that were included in Table 1 (education, age, married/partnered, union household, employment status, and church attendance). A comparison of Figures 2 and 3 shows that the nested model has slightly larger errors (overestimates) than the comprehensive model in 2000 and 2012, but the model excluding demographic variables does better in 2004, and much better in accounting for the peak turnout rate in 2008.

An examination of the trends in some of these variables helps to explain why the model without demographic variables does better than the comprehensive model (at least in 2004 and 2008). Figure 4 shows that, by and large, the democratization of education has continued more or less unabated in the years following the analyses by Brody (1978), Teixeira (1992), and Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), and its continued increase (along with the aging of the American population) accounts for some of the observed increase in turnout. However, changes in other demographic variables between 1996 and 2012 would seem to either flatten or depress turnout. As shown in Figure 4, as turnout jumped from 2004 to its peak in 2008, the proportions of people who were in union households, in church, and in a marriage (or partnership) went down between 2004 and 2008. Marriage (or partnership) rates were up in the 2012 ANES face-to-face interviews, but overall, demographics other than education and age pointed to lower (rather than higher) rates of turnout at the end of this period.
The roughly concurrent declines in turnout and partisanship led to the obvious question of whether those trends were related, and the recent concurrent resurgence in partisanship and turnout leads to the same question. Partisan voting is back up, after a transitional period during which the parties sorted out their respective ideological, class, regional, and religious bases of support (Bartels 2000b; Stonecash 2006), which resulted in greater numbers of voters able to identify important differences between the parties.

The net effect of changes in partisan attitudes since 1996 has been to push turnout slightly upward. Figure 5 shows the turnout estimates for each year based on a nested model which excludes partisan strength and respondents’ perceptions of whether there are important differences between the parties. The comparison between Figure 2 and Figure 5 reveals that changes in partisan attitudes contribute about one half percent to the estimates of turnout in 2004 and 2008, but slightly increases the overestimate in turnout in 2012. The trends shown in Figure 6 help to explain why partisan attitudes play a small role in explaining the overall trends in the turnout in US presidential elections over this period. The overall trend in perceptions of differences tracks the trend in turnout, as the proportion of Americans who perceived differences sharply increased in 2004, and increased slightly more in 2008. At the same time, the proportion of strong partisans remained relatively flat, while the proportion of weak partisans declined somewhat. On the whole, it appears that Americans’ heightened sense of important differences between the parties has modestly contributed to the surge in turnout.

Figure 5 about here

Figure 6 about here

Perceptions of Closeness and Turnout
People are slightly more likely to vote when they believe that an election is going to be close, which rational choice theorists ascribe to individuals’ perceptions that they would have a greater probability of affecting the outcome of the election, the $p$ term in the classic calculus of voting (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Though it is conceivable that other mechanisms could drive this relationship, the question here is whether recent presidential elections have been perceived as closer, and, if so, whether changes in those perceptions have contributed substantially to the rise in turnout.

The answer to both questions is “yes.” In 1996, when President Clinton had the largest margin of victory in the popular vote (8.5%) in this period, a bare majority of the public thought that the presidential election would be close. Four years later, over four fifths of the public anticipated that the election between Al Gore and George W. Bush would be close, though few could have imagined just how thin the margin between the two major party candidates would be both nationally and in a single pivotal state (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2002, 46-70). Perceptions of closeness remained relatively high in 2004, 2008, and 2012, even though Barack Obama’s actual margin of victory of 7.27% in the 2008 popular vote was not much less than George H.W. Bush’s 7.72% margin in 1988.

The comparison between Figure 2 and Figure 6 (which simulates turnout excluding perceptions of closeness) illustrates the effect that the heightened perception of closeness has had on turnout. In 2004, closeness added 1.4% to the estimated turnout rate, and it added 1.1% to the estimated turnout rate in 2008.

Figure 6 about here

Figure 7 about here
Convenience Voting and Turnout

The effects that registration laws and voting procedures can have on turnout have been well understood for at least three decades (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), so it is notable that the recent turnout increase has also coincided with an easing of voting procedures in a number of states. In 1988, only three states (Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin) permitted people to register and vote on the same day. Idaho, New Hampshire, and Wyoming followed suit shortly after the passage of the 1993 National Voter Registration Act (making them exempt from other provisions of the Act), and were joined by Iowa, Montana, and North Carolina in time for the 2008 election. Including North Dakota (which does not require voter registration), citizens in ten states (8.9% of the NES sample) could vote in the 2008 presidential election without registering at least a week to a month before Election Day. Moreover, in many locations, “Election Day” effectively has been extended by a week to a month due to statutes that permit “no excuse” absentee voting, in-person early voting, or both. While the coincidence of increasingly convenient voting methods and higher levels of turnout suggests a possible connection between the two, most research has reported rather modest effects of voting reform (as distinct from registration reform) on turnout levels, from nil (Fitzgerald 2005) to small, usually in a range from 2% to 4% (as summarized by Gronke et al. 2008). Still, the sheer magnitude of the increase in early voting (via unrestricted absentee ballots or in-person) leads many to wonder how much basic changes in election administration have contributed to the rise in turnout. (McDonald 2008b)

Not much, in my estimation. Consistent with previous findings (Fitzgerald 2005; Highton 1997; McDonald 2008a; Rhine 1995), the presence of EDR is strongly associated with higher reported turnout, but unrestricted absentee voting and early voting appears to be statistically unrelated to turnout. The overall effect of election administration changes on the turnout increase
is tiny, owing to the facts that so few (and especially so few large) states have adopted EDR, and the effects of convenience voting are so weak. Figure 9 summarizes the effects of the comprehensive model, excluding unrestricted absentee voting, early voting, and election day registration (EDR) on reported turnout over the 1996-2012 time period, and the comparison with Figure 2 shows that the contributions of the electoral laws in the model are very small in both 2004 (0.1%) and in 2008 (0.04%). Laws that govern how we register to vote do affect turnout rates, but Figure 10 shows the changes in those laws have not been extensive enough in the large states to explain much of the surge in turnout since 1996.

Figure 9 about here

Figure 10 about here

Contacting and Turnout

Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) attributed about half of the decline in turnout to the decline in contacting between 1972 and 1988. But then, quite suddenly, changes in campaign technology helped to reverse the trend in voter contacting. As more political and social data about individuals became more readily accessible, parties and interested groups changed their campaign strategies to take advantage of the opportunities to “micro-target” potential supporters, with a particular focus on trying to peel off pieces of the opposition’s potential coalition. (Hillygus and Shields 2008) While direct mail and other contacting is both more focused in content and increasingly targeted to “micro” groups, its sheer volume, as well as other forms of campaign activity, has led to a notable increase in the number of people reporting some contact over the course of the campaign.
Moreover, the increase in contacting has had a significant effect on turnout. Figure 10 shows the estimated effects of the comprehensive model without the contacting variables, and the comparison with Figure 2 shows that the increase in contacting contributed 1.4 to 1.5% in 2000 and 2004, and 1.1% in 2008. Figure 11 shows that the trends in contacting (by parties or by others) roughly parallels the trend in turnout over time.

Discussion

Following decades of turnout decline and volumes of scholarly attention to it, voter participation has surged in three of the last four U.S. presidential elections to levels last seen in the late 1960s. The proportion of eligible Americans who chose between Barack Obama and John McCain in 2008 was actually slightly higher than the proportion that chose between Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and George Wallace in 1968. Turnout is by no means high in the United States in comparison to other democracies (Franklin and Weber 2009), but the overall trend has clearly shifted direction.

Fortunately, the tools that were available for previous scholars to decompose the sources of the turnout decline are still available for our use in analyzing the rebound. Pooled cross-sectional analyses of comparable survey data gathered over successive elections enabled Teixeira (1992), Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), and others to assess which factors were most closely correlated with the fall in turnout from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. Using a similar design with some refinements in this paper, I have traced the sources of the increase in turnout that has occurred since the endpoint of their analyses. While many scholars in our field have grown accustomed to using American National Election Study data to answer questions like this one, we should not take the availability of those data for granted. ANES data are far from perfect, but
they are vitally important for the analysis of longitudinal trends in public opinion and political behavior, and the absence of a midterm election study in 2006 should serve as a reminder of how much we depend on the continuity of the ANES data to answer questions about changes in behavior.

In the early studies cited at the beginning of this paper, the spread of education and the liberalization of voting requirements exacerbated rather than solved the puzzle of turnout decline. Since 1996, neither demographic factors nor voting reforms have accounted for much of the increase in voter turnout. While larger shares of the mass public continue to avail themselves of expanding educational opportunities, any positive effect of education on turnout has largely been offset by continuing estrangement from important social linkages in society (marriage, unions, and churches, in particular), and too few (large) states have adopted the most effective electoral reform (Election Day Registration) to account for much of the increase in turnout. The mass public has more or less accurately perceived the polarization of the parties in government (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Stonecash 2006), and that perception of greater differences does seem to have substantially contributed to the increase in turnout. When more of the public thinks that the parties offer more than “a dime’s worth of difference,” (Craig and Martinez 1989) more people vote.

Most of the rest of the recent surge in turnout reflects the uptick in contacting by groups and especially by parties, as well as a greater ability on the part of the public to discern differences between the two major parties. These findings underscore the robustness of Rosenstone and Hansen’s explanation that mobilization was the key to understanding patterns of electoral participation, as contacting was a significant correlate of participation both as turnout declined and as it rebounded. While differences in individuals’ abilities, opportunities, and
incentives explain much of the cross-sectional variation in turnout, changes in the level of campaigns’ direct interactions with potential voters drives much of the aggregate variation in turnout over time. Thus, the question of whether the relatively high levels of turnout are sustainable likely depends on the resources and incentives of parties and campaigns, as well as their ability to adapt to emerging campaign technologies.

Future research will undoubtedly reveal whether some of these findings are replicable with Current Population Survey data. Larger sample sizes in the Census Bureau’s Voter Supplement Files will permit more precise estimates of the impact of education and other demographic changes on turnout, as well as the effects of changes in electoral laws on particular segments of the population (especially young people). While Census Bureau data do not contain individual level measures of political attitudes (such as partisanship or perceptions of partisan differences) or interactions with campaigns (such as contacting by parties), using those data with contextual measures of campaign activity might also provide us better insight on just who is being mobilized to participate. Moreover, we should also endeavor to understand the extent to which demographic, political, and institutional changes have also affected turnout in non-presidential elections, as well as how recent changes in mobilization and participation may have helped to shape recent election outcomes (Citrin, Schickler, and Sides 2003; Martinez and Gill 2005; Nagel and McNulty 2000), patterns of representation (Griffin and Newman 2005; Hajnal and Trounstine 2005), and public policy (Hill and Leighley 1992; Martin 2003).
References


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<td>0.112</td>
<td>0.497</td>
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<td>0.660</td>
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<td>age 25-29</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td>0.156</td>
<td>0.595</td>
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<td>0.147</td>
<td>0.078</td>
</tr>
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<td>age 40s</td>
<td>0.522</td>
<td>0.147</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age 50s</td>
<td>0.640</td>
<td>0.153</td>
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<td>age 60s</td>
<td>0.884</td>
<td>0.170</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>age 70 &amp; up</td>
<td>0.980</td>
<td>0.176</td>
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<td>Church Attendance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Every week</td>
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<td>0.082</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almost every week</td>
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<td>0.109</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<td>Once or twice / month</td>
<td>0.521</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<td>0.001</td>
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<td>0.101</td>
<td>0.092</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student</td>
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<td>0.204</td>
<td>0.120</td>
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<td>Leaner</td>
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<td>0.094</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<td>Weak Partisan</td>
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<td>0.000</td>
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<td>Strong Partisan</td>
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<td>0.000</td>
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<td>0.065</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>DK, party diffs</td>
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<td>0.179</td>
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<td>Perception of closeness</td>
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<td>0.072</td>
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<td>Mobilization</td>
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<td>Party contact</td>
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<td>Other contact</td>
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<td>Party &amp; other (interaction)</td>
<td>-0.579</td>
<td>0.185</td>
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<td>No-fault absentee</td>
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<td>0.068</td>
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<td>Early Voting</td>
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<td>0.071</td>
<td>0.699</td>
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<td>Election Day Reg.</td>
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<td>Residual deviance</td>
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<td>AIC</td>
<td>7313.318</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>12717.000</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: VEP Presidential Election Turnout Rates, 1948-2012

Source: 1948-1976 (McDonald and Popkin 2001, 966); 1980-2012 (McDonald 2009)
Source: Actual from McDonald (2009); Baseline is Actual Turnout in 1996; Estimated from author’s calculations using ANES Cumulative Data 1996-2008 and ANES 2012
Source: Actual from McDonald (2009); Baseline is Actual Turnout in 1996; Estimated from author’s calculations using ANES Cumulative Data 1996-2008 and ANES 2012

Figure 3: Actual and Estimated Turnout from Nested Model Excluding Demographic Variables

Figure 4: Trends in Turnout and Demographic Variables
Figure 5: Actual and Estimated Turnout from Nested Model Excluding Partisan Variables

Figure 6: Trends in Partisan Variables
Figure 7: Actual and Estimated Turnout from Nested Model Excluding Perception of Closeness

Figure 8: Trends in Perception of Closeness
Figure 9: Actual and Estimated Turnout from Nested Model Excluding Electoral Laws Variables

Figure 10: Trends in Numbers of People Affected by Changes in Electoral Laws
Figure 10: Actual and Estimated Turnout from Nested Model Excluding Contacting Variables
Endnotes

1 I refer to “turnout” as the number of votes cast for President as a proportion of the estimated Voting Eligible Population, as reported by McDonald (2009). That denominator excludes estimates of the numbers of noncitizens and disenfranchised felons, and includes estimates of the numbers of overseas U.S. citizens of voting age. See McDonald and Popkin (2001) for an explanation of the ramifications of using the unadjusted Voting Age Population as the denominator.

2 For example, parties and campaigns might work harder to mobilize their supporters in potentially close elections. If mobilization was the key causal variable, the observed relationship between the perception of a close election and turnout would be spurious.

3 It should be noted that Teixeira (1992, 52-54) also considered the possibility that demobilization might have contributed to the turnout decline from 1960-1988, but did not reach a conclusion about its impact. Part of the problem was that the decline in contacting (as measured by NES) started after 1972, well after the turnout had started to drop. Nevertheless, Teixeira acknowledged that changes in the quality of contacting might not be picked up by the NES indicator, and that the indirect effects of mobilization might have been obscured by the inclusion of variables nearer to the tip of the funnel of causality.

4 The ANES Cumulative Data File and the 2012 ANES data were made available to the author by the American National Election Studies (http://www.electionstudies.org). The 2012 ANES Principal Investigators were Vincent Hutchings, Gary Segura, and Simon Jackman, and Ted Brader was Associate Principal Investigator. Neither the ANES Staff nor the principal investigators are responsible for my analyses or interpretations.
For example, using the supplied weights in the 2008 ANES, the reported turnout rate was 77.4%, while the actual VEP turnout rate was 61.7%. Thus, the reported abstention rate was 23.6%, while the actual VEP abstention rate was 38.3%. For each respondent who reported voting in 2008, I calculated a new weight variable equal to the NES weight variable multiplied by the actual turnout rate divided by the reported turnout rate (61.7/77.4). For each respondent who reported abstaining in 2008, the new weight variable was the product of the NES weight variable and the actual abstention rate divided by the reported abstention rate (38.3/22.6). I followed the same procedure for all respondents to produce weights that would result in the actual VEP turnout rates in each presidential election year.

In order to do create the estimated turnout under different conditions in later steps, the secondary weight variable is applied in the estimation of the model.

In a null model with only year dummy variables, the coefficient for 2000 is not statistically significant, which reflects the small increase in turnout from 1996 to 2000. In the same null model, the dummies for 2004, 2008, and 2012 are all significant at \( p < .01 \), which reflects the large difference in turnout in each of those years relative to 1996.

Recall that in the multivariate analyses, the coefficients for each year dummy reflects the unexplained difference in the probability that a person would have voted in each year relative to 1996, controlling for other variables in the model. Thus, in order to obtain the estimated hypothetical turnout in 1996 under the modeled conditions present in 2008, I first subtract the coefficient for the 2008 year dummy from the predicted (linear) value for each case in that year (XB). I then convert those values into probabilities using the logit function \( p = e^{XB} / (1 + e^{XB}) \). The weighted sum of those probabilities is the estimated 1996 turnout under the conditions present in 2008.
For example, parties and campaigns might work harder to mobilize their supporters in potentially close elections. If mobilization was the key causal variable, the observed relationship between the perception of a close election and turnout would be spurious.