

**Do Interest Groups Influence Voting Turnout?
Evidence from the 1996 and 2000 U.S. Elections**

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Comments Welcome!

Abstract

Explaining voting turnout has been an active area of research in the political economy literature for at least four decades. Over the years, numerous theories have been advanced: rational-based theories, demographics, income, ethnicity, social groups, etc. One important aspect that has not been thoroughly explored is whether the presence of interest groups stimulates voting turnout. This paper exploits a newly created database on interest groups at the county level to answer this question. We find that voting participation rates increase in counties which also experience increases in the number of advocacy groups per capita as well as the number of charitable organizations per capita. Our evidence is consistent with an interest group-based, rational model of voting behavior.

I. Introduction

Understanding voting turnout is a perennial question in political sciences, public choice, economics, sociology and even psychology. The literature on this topic not only spans many disciplines within the social sciences, but also has been a recurring question over time. Indeed, the cumulative research on this issue has generated an enormous literature. To get a perspective on its importance Table 1 reports some metrics. A Google Scholar search engine on this topic produced 20,400 hits, sharing a tie with “current account deficit” as the fourth most important topic in this list. Using JSTOR hits as a gauge shows that voter turnout is ranked number 3 among all of the topics considered.

Why is research on voter turnout still so alive and, evidently, attractive? There are surely many reasons behind it, but perhaps the main one is that, regardless of the turnout level, it always represents a puzzle in some discipline. A low turnout level is typically seen as problematic from a social or public policy perspective. It is generally seen as being socially desirable to have a high voter turnout. Thus, when voting participation rates are low, such as in the United States, many political and social activists decry them and support policies aimed at increasing those rates. For those who believe that democracies work best when the public votes, low participation rates are seen as social problems that need to be remedied. In an effort to understand, and perhaps even reverse, this low turnout rate, a significant amount of research among social scientists has been done over the years.¹

But a high participation rate, or even participating at all, also represents a puzzle. From a public choice and political science perspective, it is well understood that the probability of a single vote becoming influential in an election is, for all practical purposes, zero. Hence, rational models of voting behavior have to appeal to reasons for voting other

¹ For an overview of this strand of the literature see Avey (1989) as well as Bullock, Gaddie, and Ferrington (2002).

than a conscious, rational calculus. For example, many researchers have highlighted the role of “civic duty” (or, more simply, consumption) as a driver of voting participation.

Although the role of civic duty in explaining voter turnout is simple and straightforward, it may also be a bit unsatisfying from an intellectual angle because, in a sense, this explanation is tantamount to saying that “people vote because they like to do it.” The continuing effort for understanding voter turnout from a rational perspective has led to a rich theoretical literature on voting behavior.² Surprisingly, however, only a handful of papers look at the role of interest groups in explaining voter turnout.

The purpose of this paper is to fill this gap by providing some empirical evidence in support of the hypothesis that interest groups enhance the role of “civic duty,” thereby stimulating a higher turnout level. The way this mechanism operates fits quite well within a rational based voting theory model.³

In this paper, we use the 1996 and 2000 voting participation rates at the county level to examine whether changes in participation rates are correlated with changes in the number of advocacy groups or changes in the number of charitable, non-profit organizations. The intuition for examining this relationship is based on the theoretical work that highlights the role of organized groups in stimulating the public to become expressive voters (those who vote purely out of consumption).⁴ In a nutshell, these organizations or groups enhance the sense of civic duty among group members. By altering the payoffs to voters (through the creation of a common, group-wide incentive) group leaders can galvanize members and increase turnout levels. Thus, group members are more likely to have a sense of “civic duty,” and hence more likely to participate in elections.

² For a very useful overview see Aldrich (1997).

³ See, for example, Uhlaner (1989).

⁴ See Morton (1987), Schwartz (1987), and Uhlaner (1989).

By and large, this is exactly what we find. Counties that see an increase in the number of advocacy groups per capita or the number of non-profit organizations per capita tend to also experience an increase in its voting participation rate, even after controlling for changes in income per capita.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section presents a summary of the rational choice voting model in order to highlight the role of “civic duty” in the voting calculus within the context of an interest group-based, rational voting model. Section III discusses the data and provides detailed definitions of the variables included in the regressions. Section IV discusses the regression results, while Section V offers some concluding remarks.

II. “Civic Duty” in a Rational Choice Voting Model with Interest Groups

The rational choice voting model is one of the most basic voting models studied in political sciences as well as public choice. Numerous surveys and textbooks explain the basic methodology, which is based on the work of Downs (1957) and Riker and Odershook (1968). The purpose of this section is not to survey this literature, but rather to frame the notion of “civic duty” within the context of the rational voting model.

The canonical rational voting model equation is:

$$pB + d - c > 0 \tag{1}$$

In this equation, p represents the probability of making a difference in the election (i.e. making or breaking a tie), B represents the benefits an individual voter obtains from his/her preferred candidate, c the intrinsic costs of voting, and d represents the “civic duty” term (which captures the intrinsic benefits of voting).

Since p is essentially zero, the rational voting model implies that citizens will not find it worthwhile to participate in elections unless their civic duty sense (the d term in equation (1)) is higher than the intrinsic cost of voting (the c term in the same equation). If d differs across individuals, then voting participation will also be individual specific.

Uhlener (1989) incorporates the role of interest groups within a rational model of voting behavior and finds that the inclusion of these groups can increase voting participation rates. The argument is straightforward. The model consists of three participants: citizens, group leaders, and candidates. Citizens are modeled as being Downsian voters who choose to vote if the expected utility of the payoff from voting is higher than that from abstaining. A citizen derives voting satisfaction in two different ways: consumption benefits (derived from the act of voting) and investment benefits, which depend on whether the voter's preferred candidate wins, or his/her opponent wins. Because citizens are being modeled as Downsian, the investment component depends on the distance between the voter's ideal policy point and that of his/her preferred candidate. As the candidate moves closer to the voter's ideal policy point, the value of voting increases. The problem is, of course, that this increase in utility has to be adjusted by the probability that an individual's vote makes a difference. With this probability being small, the investment benefits tend to be correspondingly small.

Group leaders, however, can change the calculus of voting because they can, if powerful enough, elicit a change in the candidate's position closer to the ideal or preferred policy point (of the leader, and hence, of the group). Any shift in the candidate's position derived from this "negotiation" process represents a surplus which can be distributed among group members. Group leaders, hence, can entice citizens (members) to vote by giving them this surplus.

Finally, candidates are modeled as also being utility maximizers with their preferences increasing with the probability of winning. Candidates, hence, must weight in the probability distribution for turnout among group members, the shift in his/her policy position, and the votes from other groups foregone as a result of the policy shift.

Section III: Data

As indicated in the introduction, we use advocacy groups as well as charitable organizations as gauges of the sense of civic duty among potential voters. But what, exactly, are these groups and organizations?⁵ And, how can we be sure that they are good proxies for measuring civic duty?

Advocacy or promotional interest groups are civic leagues and social welfare organizations formed to influence governments, businesses, and other organizations in society. The National Rifle Association, the American Association of Retired Persons, and the Waterville Women's Association are classic examples. These organizations are formed under Internal Revenue Code section 501 (c) (4).

Charities are somewhat different organizations. Legally, they are organized under Internal Revenue Code section 501 (c) (3). They are limited in the extent to which they can participate in legislative advocacy. Charities that exceed specific advocacy spending limits jeopardize their tax-exempt status. Civic leagues and social welfare organizations (advocacy groups), by contrast, face no legislative advocacy spending limitations. Furthermore, charities also are constrained with regard to the endorsement of political candidates. From this perspective, they are distinct from political campaign nonprofit organizations (IRC section 527).

⁵ For an in-depth definition and analysis of interest groups in the political process see Truman (1971), Olson (1971) as well as Wilson (1993).

The interest group counts are from the IRS Business Master Files for tax years 1996 and 2000. For specific details as to how the records are culled, updated, sorted, and counted see Sampson (2007).

Undoubtedly, the accuracy of any given count is affected by several factors. Errors owed to tax-filing rules and tax-filing practices are present for all counties. For instance, organizations with incomes under \$5000 are not required to register as nonprofits. Since these organizations are not counted, there is no way of determining their numbers. Also, the IRS Business Master Files contain some inactive organizations. Every three years the IRS tries to verify the existence of each organization. Their culling process is imperfect and is sometimes hampered when organizations change their addresses.

In addition, some organizations choose to file group returns. A group return is a single tax return filed under a single Employer Identification Number (EIN) that reports the combined income for multiple affiliated organizations or chapters. Each chapter or affiliate has its own EIN but is not required to file a separate return if its income is reported on a group return. Group returns create a counting problem because a parent organization that resides in one county might have many affiliates or chapters in many different counties or in many different states. Therefore, some group returns, though recorded appropriately in the database, cause an undercount of affiliated organizations.

Occasionally, group returns are entered into the Business Master Files according to the affiliates' EINs as opposed to the parent's EIN. When this error occurs, the parent's address information is married to each affiliate's EIN; the result is an over count for the parent's county and an undercount for each of the affiliates' counties. Fortunately, the incidence of this type of problem appears to be very small. No more than 0.32 percent of the observations are likely to be affected by this type of error.

Despite these drawbacks, these data are perhaps the best available to answer the question posed in the introduction. Because the sole purpose of these organizations is to influence policymaking at various levels, it is very likely that members of these advocacy groups and charitable organizations display a sense of civic duty that is higher than the “average” citizen. The next section presents empirical tests of the hypothesis that these groups or organizations do indeed make a difference in voter turnout.

Section IV: Regression Results

To estimate the influence of advocacy groups and non-profit organizations in voting participation rates we ran the following regression:

$$\% \Delta vp = \beta_0 + \beta_1 (\% \Delta ag) + \beta_2 (\% \Delta co) + \beta_3 (\% \Delta y) + \varepsilon$$

Where vp stands for voting participation rate, ag stands for the number of advocacy groups per capita, co stands for the number of charitable organizations per capita, and y stands for income per capita at the county level. The ε is the error term. $\% \Delta$ stands for percentage change, and it is computed as the difference of the log value of each variable from 1996 to 2000. Estimating this regression in changes eliminates the need to control for fixed effects since running the regression in changes removes all time-invariant factors.

The regression results are presented in Table 3. The table shows four regressions corresponding to different specifications. Overall, the results are very supportive of this paper’s hypothesis. A one percent increase in the number of advocacy groups per capita is associated with an increase of approximately 0.05 percent in voting participation rate at the county level. The elasticity for charitable organizations is about twice as large—a one percent increase in the number of charitable organizations per capita is associated with a 0.10 percent increase in voting participation rates. The results are clearly robust to the inclusion of

changes in income per capita. Thus, overall, it appears to be the case that counties that see an increase in charitable organizations and advocacy groups also see an increase in voting participation rates.

V. Concluding Remarks

The main objective of this paper is to provide some empirical evidence in support of the contention that “civic duty” may actually be an important determinant of voter participation rates. Using a previously unexploited dataset, we find that counties that exhibit an increase in the number of advocacy groups per capita or an increase in the number of charitable organizations per capita also tend to have an increase in voter participation rates. We interpret this evidence in support of the hypothesis that civic duty is the main driver behind people’s decision to vote. The results are consistent with an augmented rational voting model that incorporates the role of interest groups.

Table 1
Measuring the Importance of Voter Turnout

Topic	Google Scholar Hits	Google Hits Rank	JSTOR Hits	JSTOR Hits Rank
Minimum Wage	90,800	1	14,467	1
Budget Deficits	35,200	2	4,545	2
<u>Voter Turnout</u>	<u>20,600</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3,305</u>	<u>3</u>
Long-Run Growth	27,600	3	2,518	4
Bank Failures	13,500	6	2,232	5
FDIC	20,100	5	1,774	6
Current Account Deficit	20,600	4	1,302	7
Oil Shocks	10,900	8	1,084	8
Exchange Rate Dynamics	9,910	9	1,038	9
Ricardian Equivalence	5,740	10	825	10
Behavioral Economics	11,900	7	822	11
New Growth Theory	5,450	11	325	12
Sub-prime crisis	415	12	0	13

Table 2
Summary Statistics

Variable	Count	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Income Per Capita in 1996	3,081	19,418	4,393	4,135	66,058
Income Per Capita in 2000	3,081	23,072	5,754	7,480	85,752
Charitable Nonprofits in 1996	3,128	201	706	1	21,009
Charitable Nonprofits in 2000	3,137	228	791	0	23,213
Charitable Nonprofits Per Capita in 1996	3,032	2.36	1.53	0.12	45.19
Charitable Nonprofits Per Capita in 2000	3,137	2.64	1.66	0.00	38.50
Advocacy Nonprofits in 1996	3,101	40	133	1	5,942
Advocacy Nonprofits in 2000	3,137	36	76	0	2,006
Advocacy Nonprofits Per Capita in 1996	3,005	0.77	0.61	0.06	16.78
Advocacy Nonprofits Per Capita in 2000	3,137	0.72	0.54	0.00	6.80
Population in 1996	3,040	79,326	268,270	336	9,127,751
Population in 2000	3,137	89,506	292,513	147	9,519,338
Population Density in 1996	3,040	132	424	0	11,719
Population Density in 2000	3,137	241	1,659	0	66,835
Voter Participation Rate in 1996	3,135	55	10	10	97
Voter Participation Rate in 2000	3,107	51	10	13	95

Notes: Income per capita is in current dollars. Charitable Nonprofits per capita as well as Advocacy Nonprofits per capita are per thousand people. Population density is defined as total population divided by county area. Voter participation rates are in percent and it is defined as number of votes in the presidential election divided by the total population over 20 years of age.

Table 3
Explaining Changes In Voting Participation Rates

	Regression 1	Regression 2	Regression 3	Regression 4
%Δ Adv Groups	0.051 (0.009) <i>0.000</i>	0.058 (0.009) <i>0.000</i>	0.051 (0.009) <i>0.000</i>	0.058 (0.009) <i>0.000</i>
%Δ Charit. Org.	0.100 (0.013) <i>0.000</i>		0.101 (0.013) <i>0.000</i>	
%Δ income pc	-0.010 (0.029) <i>0.730</i>	-0.005 (0.029) <i>0.854</i>		
Constant	-0.076 (0.006) <i>0.000</i>	-0.065 (0.005) <i>0.000</i>	-0.078 (0.002) <i>0.000</i>	-0.067 (0.002) <i>0.000</i>
Num of Obs.	2956	2960	2979	2983
Adj. R ²	0.031	0.012	0.031	0.013
F-test	32.520	19.620	49.220	39.190
Prob>F	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Notes: The dependent variable is the percentage change (between 1996 and 2000) in the voting participation rate at the county level. This variable is computed as the difference in the log of the 2000 election participation rate minus the log of the 1996 election participation rate. The independent variables are defined as follows: “%Δ Adv Groups” is the percentage change in the per capita number of advocacy groups in each county (from 1996 to 2000). “%Δ Charit. Org.” is the percentage change in the per capita number of charitable organizations in each county. “%Δ income pc” is the percentage change in income per capita. All percentage changes are computed as differences in logs. Standard errors are reported in parenthesis under each coefficient. P-values are in italics.

Data Sources

Variable Description	Variable Source
Income Per Capita in 1996	Bureau of Economic Analysis
Income Per Capita in 2000	2000 County Data Book-Census Bureau
Charitable Nonprofits in 1996	1996 IRS Business Master Files
Charitable Nonprofits in 2000	2000 IRS Business Master Files
Advocacy Nonprofits in 1996	1996 IRS Business Master Files
Advocacy Nonprofits in 2000	2000 IRS Business Master Files
Population in 1996	ICPSR 2896-Part 82: 1998 USA COUNTIES
Population in 2000	2000 County Data Book-Census Bureau
Voter Participation Rate in 1996*	ICPSR 2896-Part 82: 1998 USA COUNTIES
Voter Participation Rate in 2000*	Federal Elections Project

* Voter participation rate is defined as votes cast in Federal Elections divided by population over age 20.

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