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Mark N. Franklin

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Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945

Voting is a habit. People learn the habit of voting, or not, based on experience in their first few elections. Elections that do not stimulate high turnout among young adults leave a “footprint” of low turnout in the age structure of the electorate as many individuals who were new at those elections fail to vote at subsequent elections. Elections that stimulate high turnout leave a high turnout footprint. So a country’s turnout history provides a baseline for current turnout that is largely set, except for young adults. This baseline shifts as older generations leave the electorate and as changes in political and institutional circumstances affect the turnout of new generations. Among the changes that have affected turnout in recent years, the lowering of the voting age in most established democracies has been particularly important in creating a low turnout footprint that has grown with each election.

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MARK N. FRANKLIN

Trinity College Connecticut

with assistance from

Cees van der Eijk, Diana Evans, Michael Fotos,
Wolfgang Hirczy de Mino, Michael Marsh, and
Bernard Wessels



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This book is for Diane

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Preface

Human beings, it has been suggested, have a “puzzle instinct” (Danesi 2002) – a fascination with puzzles and an aptitude for solving them. Academic research in most disciplines is all about puzzle-solving, but political science is perhaps unusual in being home to a great many puzzles that are of interest beyond the walls of academe. Bernard Grofman recently edited a book with the title *Political Science as Puzzle-Solving* (2001) whose premise was that interesting puzzles lead us to topics where the tools and skills of political science can be brought to bear, teaching us useful things about the world.

If the vexing questions of political science can be regarded as puzzles, the particular topic of voter turnout could be called the “grand enchilada” of puzzles in political science. As we will see in Chapter 1, almost everything about voter turnout is puzzling, from the question of why anyone bothers to vote at all to the question of why certain variables appear to explain voter turnout in some circumstances but not in others.

I became interested in these puzzles in the early 1990s as a by-product of my interest in elections to the European Parliament. Turnout in these elections is very low despite the fact that they occur in countries (of the European Union) where turnout levels in national elections are generally high. The attempt to explain low turnout in European Parliament elections in terms that would be generalizable – an explanation that would say more than that these elections are different or exceptional – led me to an interest in turnout in general, reinforced by

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the fact that I found myself supervising a dissertation at the University of Houston on the topic of voter turnout. These two experiences, which coincided in time, brought home to me the fact that this is a vitally important area of research that is very poorly understood. As my interest in voter turnout moved beyond European Parliament elections to elections in general, I became aware that the United States (to which I had moved in 1989) was a country in which voter turnout presented a particular puzzle. Why, in the world's oldest democracy (or perhaps second-oldest, depending on how you count), was turnout at national elections so abysmally low? When I became aware that the other country, Switzerland, which vies for the title of "world's oldest democracy," was also one in which turnout was abysmally low, I decided that this phenomenon was definitely worthy of extended study.

These three explanations for my interest in voter turnout also provide the start of an explanation for why this book has so many co-authors. Some were my co-investigators on the European Elections Study project. Another is the scholar who was the student writing that dissertation. Still others became involved when my interest in voter turnout moved beyond my areas of expertise (either in terms of countries I know well or of political science subfields in which I am well versed). I have always believed in making use of colleagues when I find myself out of my depth, and the number of co-authors who share credit for this book attests to the frequency with which I was confronted by my own ignorance when addressing the voter turnout puzzles.

The contributions made by those with whom I share this book's authorship vary greatly, from helping me to sort out the vagaries of German and other survey data (Bernard Wessels) through the co-authorship of a conference paper that is the basis of a chapter that I could not have written alone (Mike Fotos), to long discussions and years of collaboration on multiple projects central and peripheral to this one (Cees van der Eijk, Diana Evans, Wolfgang Hirczy, and Michael Marsh). Where these contributors share authorship of particular passages, sections, or chapters, this is acknowledged in footnotes. I am grateful for their willingness to share the fruit of our joint labors. The effects of these individuals on the book more generally is acknowledged here, along with my debts to other scholars who have labored in the vineyard of voter turnout studies. These are too numerous to list exhaustively, and I am sure they know who they are, but I must mention

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Though all of these people and institutions deserve credit and thanks, none of them bears responsibility for remaining errors and infelicities, which no doubt are numerous despite all my efforts and theirs.

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