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978-1-107-01541-8 - Voter Turnout: A Social Theory of Political Participation

Meredith Rolfe

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Voter Turnout

This book develops and empirically tests a social theory of political participation. It overturns prior understandings of why some people (such as college-degree holders, churchgoers, and citizens in national rather than local elections) vote more often than others. The book shows that the standard demographic variables are not proxies for variation in the individual costs and benefits of participation, but for systematic variation in the patterns of social ties between potential voters. Potential voters who move in larger social circles, particularly those including politicians and other mobilizing political actors, have more access to the flurry of electoral activity prodding citizens to vote and increasing political discussion.

Treating voting as a socially defined practice instead of as an individual choice over personal payoffs, a social theory of participation is derived from a mathematical model with behavioral foundations. The model of turnout is empirically calibrated and tested using multiple methods and data sources.

Meredith Rolfe is a Fellow in the Management Department at the London School of Economics. Prior to joining LSE, she held a Postdoctoral Prize Research Fellowship at Nuffield College, Oxford, and was a Senior Research Fellow at Saïd Business School, Oxford. Dr. Rolfe holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Chicago, and her dissertation was awarded the Mancur Olson Dissertation Prize by the APSA Political Economy organised section. Her research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the British Academy, Oxford's John Fell Fund, the EU-sponsored EqualSOC Framework, and the Oxford University Centre of Corporation Reputation. Her work has appeared in *Public Opinion Quarterly* and *L'Année Sociologique*, and she was an invited contributor to the *Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology* and the *Oxford Handbook of Corporate Reputation*.

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MEREDITH ROLFE

London School of Economics



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This book is dedicated to my grandfather, Curry, and to the memory of my grandparents, Audrey, Lalla, and Shelley. All four were (and are) politically active citizens who brought out the best in those around them, although only one had a college degree.

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Why talk about social decision-making? Isn't it enough to talk about individual decision-making? Why do we need social decision making at all? Today there is abroad the land the libertarian delusion that individuals are some sort of Leibnizian monads ... each with a consistent independent utility function and each interacting with its fellows only through its knowledge of market prices. Not so. We are not monads because, among many other reasons, our values, the alternatives of action that we are aware of, our understanding of what consequences may flow from our actions – all this knowledge, all these preferences – derive from our interaction with our social environment. Some of our values and knowledge were sucked in with our mother's milk; others were taken, often quite uncritically, from our social environment. Still others, perhaps were acquired by reacting against that environment, but few indeed, surely, in complete independence of it.

– Herbert Simon, 1983 Reason

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Preface

Although this book is a study of traditional political participation, it has intellectual roots in the study of collective action and social movements. As an undergraduate at Duke University, I delved deeply into the topic of collective action, with Ed Tiryakian and Tom Janoski serving as teachers and advisors. By the end of my time at Duke, I viewed the interaction between heterogeneous individual motives and social network structure as crucial to understanding social movements.

Early in my graduate career at the University of Chicago, I approached Jim Fearon to discuss whether it would be possible to write a dissertation expanding on these themes. He suggested I study voter turnout, a path that would allow me to explore the impact of heterogeneity and networks within political science. This book is based on the dissertation that resulted from that conversation.

This book owes much to the intellectual freedom cultivated at Chicago and to the strong support that was provided (and is still being provided) by my committee members and other current and former Chicago faculty. Mark Hansen's comments consistently inspired major improvements in the work, and our discussions pushed me to integrate politics and political mobilization into a theory grounded in social interaction. John Brehm served as both an intellectual and personal inspiration through the tough times of writing a dissertation and provided invaluable assistance when I had to grapple with the sticky issues involved with survey self-selection.

John Padgett introduced me to the technical study of networks, and I am still thankful for his insistence that I adopt a careful and mathematically rigorous approach to agent-based models. Jonathan Katz helped me get the project off the ground and ensured that I was able to pass on to

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candidacy only weeks before the birth of my first child. Jeff Grynawski stepped in toward the end of the process, challenging me with comments that were always on my mind as I undertook the revisions required to turn a dissertation into a book. Long conversations with Michael Dawson and Lisa Weeden about the role of social meaning in decision making directly inspired the research behind Chapter 3 and helped me to fill a gaping logical hole in my original dissertation. I would also like to acknowledge my former MA advisor, the late Roger Gould, whose ideas are part of the intellectual basis for this work and whose presence is sorely missed.

Discussions with Mike Neblo pushed my thinking on social norms, while Anne Shiu spent hours discussing mathematics and probability. Matt Kocher read several chapters at various stages and always remained positive about the project while pushing me to deal with some of the vexing philosophical issues. Jason Plaks gave detailed comments from a social psychology perspective on an early draft of Chapter 2, although I doubt that the rewritten version has done his insights justice. Members of the American Politics and Political Economy Workshops at Chicago commented on multiple versions of this work in its early stages. Excerpts were also presented at the University of Pennsylvania Ashe Center, University of Manchester Sociology Seminar, Oxford University's Cabdyn group, Nuffield College Sociology and Social Networks Seminars, the annual Argonne-sponsored Agents conference, and the annual MPSA meeting.

The manuscript was largely completed while I was at Nuffield College, and I was lucky to have had personal and intellectual support from Peter Hedström, Diego Gambetta, Yvonne Åberg, and Des King as my family and I settled into a new country. Ray Duch and David Barron were (and are) supportive senior colleagues who added greatly to my time at Oxford. Adrienne LeBas' red pen left its stain on several chapters, but it is fair to say that she is a fantastic writing coach and a better friend. Elisabeth Ivarsflaten discussed various aspects of the work in depth and was a gracious host when I needed time away from home to focus on the manuscript. I was lucky to meet fellow intellectual traveller Quentin van Doosselaere, who also generously provided me with a space to work away from the chaos. My former student and ongoing collaborator Jason Bello read the entire manuscript closely, provided detailed and useful comments, and helped me maintain an interest in the topic long after I was ready to abandon it. Linn Normand provided able assistance in preparing the analysis for Chapter 3.

The models in the book were made possible by the terrific RePast team. Nick Collier spent hours coaching me up the steep Java and RePast

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learning curves, while Skye Bendor de Moll kindly designed a network creation package to my specification.

Last but not least, no mother of two can finish a PhD or a book without seemingly endless support from family, both literal and figurative. There are no words to convey my appreciation to Scott Blinder, as he knows, although more than a few of the words in this book are his. Both sets of grandparents, Vickie and Chris Rolfe and Madeline and Alan Blinder, were always ready and willing to help at a moment's notice. My mother took on the difficult task of proofreading early versions of chapters and was always available when I needed someone to listen. My mother-in-law made sure I had a quiet, well-provisioned place to write at several crucial junctures and has been a dedicated promoter of this project. This book grew up along with my children, and I was blessed with exceptional au-pairs, childcare providers and housekeepers throughout: Eva, Eric, Anousha, Gokçe, Devrim, Olga, Emilie, Gabor, Edja, Fabricio, and Leila. Malcolm and Levi Blinder may have slowed the whole process down, but they kept me going with their jokes and smiles as they got older. See Levi, there is a real book on the shelf now!

A very special thanks to series editor Steve Ansolabehere, and to Lew Bateman and Anne Lovering Rounds of Cambridge University Press for making the final steps of the process as painless as possible.

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