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 Said 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*. 
Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions

Series Editors
Stephen Ansolabehere, Harvard University
Jeffry Frieden, Harvard University

Founding Editors
James E. Alt, Harvard University
Douglass C. North, Washington University of St. Louis

Other Books in the Series
Alberto Alesina and Howard Rosenthal, Partisan Politics, Divided
Government and the Economy
Lee J. Alston, Thrainn Eggertsson, and Douglass C. North, eds.,
Empirical Studies in Institutional Change
James E. Alt and Kenneth Shepsle, eds., Perspectives on Positive Political Economy
Jeffrey S. Banks and Eric A. Hanushek, eds., Modern Political Economy: Old Topics, New Directions
Yoram Barzel, Economic Analysis of Property Rights, 2nd edition
Yoram Barzel, A Theory of the State: Economic Rights, Legal Rights, and the Scope of the State
Jenna Bednar, The Robust Federation: Principles of Design
Charles M. Cameron, Veto Bargaining: Presidents and the Politics of Negative Power
Kelly H. Chang, Appointing Central Bankers: The Politics of Monetary Policy in the United States and the European Monetary Union
Peter Cowhey and Mathew McCubbins, eds., Structure and Policy in Japan and the United States: An Institutionalist Approach

(continued after Index)
Voter Turnout

A Social Theory of Political Participation

MEREDITH ROLFE

London School of Economics
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.
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
Contents

List of Figures                  page xi
List of Tables                  xii
Preface                        xiii

1. Voting Together              1
   The social theory of voter turnout  3
   Conditional choice and conditional decision making  4
   The orthodox view: Voters making decisions  7
   Contextual explanations of voter turnout  10
   Overview of remaining chapters  18

2. Conditional Choice           21
   The evidence for conditional decision making  22
   Mathematical models of conditional decision making  28
   Engineering a model and mid-level theory  39

3. The Social Meaning of Voting 42
   Social meaning: People and relationships  43
   Data and methods  46
   Voting is the act of an American citizen  48
   Voters as Americans: Is there a consensus?  51
   American citizens: Formal equality, informal ambiguity  56
   Concluding thoughts  62

4. Conditional Cooperation      64
   Experimental decision situations similar to voting  64
   Distribution of decision rules  69
## Contents

5. Conditional Voters: Dynamics and Networks  
   Conditional cooperation: The basic dynamic 78  
   Conditional cooperation in local social networks 79  
   Conclusion 84

6. The Social Theory of Turnout 98  
   Strategic politicians and conditional decision makers: A theoretical synthesis 99  
   Cross-national variation: First movers and costs 101  
   Variation across elections: Campaign activity and political discussion 106  
   Individual variation in turnout 113

7. Education and High-Salience Elections 125  
   Social theory: Implications of the model 126  
   A new look at education 129  
   Comparing social cooperation and civic voluntarism 141  
   Discussion 148

8. Mobilization in Low-Salience Elections 151  
   Turnout patterns in low-salience elections 152  
   Data 156  
   Candidates, campaigning, and social ties 162  
   Mobilization and turnout at the precinct level 169

9. Paradox Lost 178  
   Conditional choice and the conditional decision-making model 179  
   Empirical support for a new view of education and income 182  
   Making sense of existing research 183  
   Further implications 185

Appendix A Simulations of the Conditional Cooperation Model 191  
   Validating the programmed model 193  
   Model extensions: Network construction 194

Appendix B Methodological Notes on the General Social Survey 197

References 201

Index 223
Figures

2.1. Three basic conditional decision rules
2.2. Example of weighted turnout decision rule
5.1. Expected turnout (cooperation) rate or adoption curve
5.2. Distribution of final-round turnout for each parameter combination
5.3. Average simulated turnout when voters have global networks
5.4. Effects of network size and density on simulated cooperation (turnout) rate
6.1. Average turnout when first movers are 12.5% of the population
6.2. Average turnout when first movers are 15% of the population
6.4. Turnout in lower-salience local and national American elections
6.5. Average turnout when first movers are 10% of the population
6.6. Frequency of political discussion by individual education
6.7. Personal network size and social network context
7.1. Educational diversity of discussion networks
7.2. Size and density of discussion networks in two social worlds
7.3. Voter turnout in two social worlds
8.1. County map with race and institutions highlighted
8.2. County map with education and income
8.3. Map of district with additional high-profile campaign
8.4. Map of turnout by precinct in 2004 primary election
Tables

2.1. Formal Mechanisms and Empirical Variables \hspace{2cm} \textit{page} 40
3.1. Importance of Civic Obligations \hspace{2cm} 51
3.2. Respondents Agreeing That Voting Is Not Necessary \hspace{2cm} 54
4.1. Estimated Use of Basic Decision Rules \hspace{2cm} 71
5.1. Estimates of Personal Network Size and Density \hspace{2cm} 89
7.1. Average Turnout Rate in Simulations, by Network Size \hspace{2cm} 128
7.2. Ties to a College-Educated Alter, by Individual Education \hspace{2cm} 132
7.3. Political Discussion, by Individual Education and Social World \hspace{2cm} 142
7.4. Estimated Effects of Education and Social Network Context on Voter Turnout \hspace{2cm} 145
8.1. Predictions of the Social and Resource Theories of Voter Turnout in Low-Salience Elections \hspace{2cm} 153
8.2. Precinct-Level Turnout in the 2004 Primary \hspace{2cm} 170
8.3. Predicting Turnout Rates at the Precinct Level \hspace{2cm} 176
A.1. Simulation Parameters \hspace{2cm} 192
A.2. Median Degree (and Density) of Simulated Networks \hspace{2cm} 196
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
Preface

xiv

candidacy only weeks before the birth of my first child. Jeff Grynaviski 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
Preface

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, Gökçe, 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.

This material is based in part on work supported by the National Science Foundation under Dissertation Improvement Grant No. SBR-0453076. All faults and omissions remain my own.