Introduction

Political equality is an essential political ideal and it is the cornerstone of moral justifications of democracy. Most people would agree with the proposition that the interests and preferences of each citizen must be given equal consideration in the political process because no person is intrinsically superior to others in ways that can justify preferential consideration. A second premise is that each person is the best judge of her own interests and preferences and is capable of expressing them, hence ruling out any version of an enlightened sovereign as the best interpreter of citizens' will. Taken together, these two claims provide a powerful case for democracy. Only in electoral democracies can all citizens, in principle, have an equal influence in the political process (Dahl 1971, 2008; Przeworski 2010).

The focus on equality of influence as a key ingredient of political equality is central to many theoretical perspectives. According to Robert Dahl (2008), in an ideal democracy, all members of the community must have equal opportunities to express their views about alternative policies, they must have equal influence on the agenda, and every vote must be counted equally. Relatedly, for Sidney Verba political equality "refers to the extent to which citizens have an equal voice in governmental decisions" (2003: 663). In a third influential definition, political equality is the "requirement that democratic institutions should provide

citizens with equal procedural opportunities to influence political decisions" (Beitz 1989: 4). Political equality demands that individual interests and preferences be expressed and aggregated in such a way that each member of the polity has an equal amount of weight at determining the collective outcome.

The actual ability to influence the outcomes of the political process surely varies widely across citizens and relevant social groups in practice. In real democratic systems many citizens lack relevant resources and effective opportunities to participate in political decisions, interest groups are able to shape which issues make it onto the political agenda, and the influence of money in politics is pervasive. To the extent that equalizing access to all relevant resources, such as money, influence on the agenda, and political contacts, is unfeasible or undesirable, full political equality remains a distant goal.

When narrowing down from equal political influence to equal participation in elections, the prospects for political equality are less dismal. Despite the very real barriers to full political equality, elections provide a unique way in which large numbers of citizens can each have the same amount of influence on the selection of governments and induce politicians to be equally responsive to their interests and preferences. The principle "one person, one vote" effectively spreads political power among all the adult members of a polity. It simultaneously gives every member of the polity the option to participate and caps the amount of influence each citizen can have on the outcome of an election. Voting is thus "the one participatory act for which there is mandated equality; each citizen gets one vote and only one vote" (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995: 304).

Equal participation in elections is perhaps the most important and feasible practical application of the democratic ideal of political equality. Yet not even participation in elections is equal. Electoral participation can be unequal if members of some politically relevant groups, typically lower-status groups, systematically fail to vote.

This book is about unequal political participation, or the lower participation of low-status groups in elections. Political scientists

care about unequal political participation because it implies that low-turnout groups, who are likely to have different political needs, interests, abilities, and preferences than other groups, exert less influence on the selection of governments than they would if participation were equal. The preferences of abstainers not only fail to have an influence at the selection stage, but they are also disregarded at the policy-making stage. Elected political representatives have no incentive to be evenly responsive to all if some distinguishable groups have lower participation rates than others. Instead, it is rational for politicians to satisfy the demands of very participatory groups, whose votes they need in order to be reelected, but neglect the views of regular nonvoters. If policies neglect the wants and needs of the most disadvantaged, their situation relative to other groups may deteriorate even further. Unequal participation generates unequal responsiveness of governments to the preferences of different types of citizens, possibly leading to a vicious circle in which social and political disadvantages reinforce each other over time. These considerations have led Arendt Lijphart to declare that unequal participation is "democracy's unresolved dilemma" (1997: 1).

Empirically, it is a political science truism that voter participation is unequal in the United States. The influential socioeconomic status (SES) model of political participation builds on the observation that higher levels of education and income and having a higher-status occupation are associated with higher turnout rates (Verba and Nie 1972). Education, in particular, is perhaps the strongest individual level predictor of the decision to vote. In 1972, only 38 percent of those with four years of education or less voted, compared to 91 percent of those who had attended college for five years or more (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) estimate that the voter turnout rates of college graduates exceed those of the grade-school educated by almost 30 percentage points. Using the cumulative American National Studies file, Han (2009) found a 30 percentage points participation gap in the turnout rates of people with a grade school education and people with a college degree in 1952, which increased to 40 percentage points in 2000. The evidence

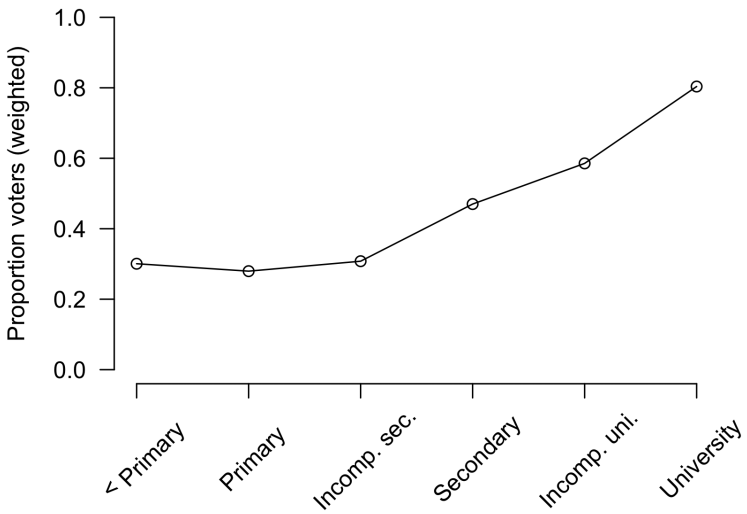

FIGURE 0–1. Reported voter turnout in the United States, 2004 election. *Source*: CSES

that the poorly educated vote less frequently is so overwhelming that scholars have claimed: "The relationship between education and voter turnout ranks among the most extensively documented correlations in American survey research. From the early work of Merriam and Gosnell (1924) to today, literally thousands of cross-sectional surveys have indicated that turnout rates climb with years of formal schooling" (Sondheimer and Green 2010: 174).

There is no doubt that participation is highly unequal in the United States, as seen in Figure 0–1, which uses data from the cross-national Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) for the 2004 presidential election.[1] About 30 percent of Americans with less than a primary education and 28 percent of

[1] It is also well known that voter turnout is overestimated by surveys. For descriptive purposes it is useful to weight the data in order to correct for overreporting. The weights are calculated as $W_{Vj} = \frac{V_{Oj}}{V_{Rj}}$ for voters and $W_{Nj} = \frac{1-V_{Oj}}{1-V_{Rj}}$ for nonvoters, where V_O is official turnout rate and V_R is reported turnout rate in country j. The official turnout data comes from the International Institute for

those with only a primary education voted in the last presidential election. By contrast, 47 percent of people who completed secondary education and fully 80 percent of those who had a college degree voted in the election.[2]

However, we know much less about unequal participation in other countries and very little about what drives differences in turnout inequality across countries. The aim of this book is to describe and explain unequal participation from a comparative perspective.

Political scientists often assume that lower-status groups universally vote at lower rates than higher-status groups, except perhaps in countries that use compulsory voting. If this were true, it would suggest that unequal participation is an unavoidable trait of democratic politics, a deep-seated flaw in an otherwise desirable political system.

In fact, however, the less educated *vote just as frequently* as the highly educated in many countries. Consider Spain, where voting is voluntary, as an example. Since the end of Franco's dictatorship, participation rates in parliamentary elections have ranged from a low of 68 percent of the voting-age population in 1979, to a high of 80 percent in 1982, one year after a failed coup d'état (Montero 1986). Besides these initial fluctuations, voter turnout has been very stable. On average, 74 percent of Spanish citizens vote in parliamentary elections, a figure typical

Democracy and Electoral Assistance voter turnout database (http://www.idea.int/vt/, visited June 2011). Voter turnout is always the ratio of voters to the Voting Eligible Population, except in the United States where it is the ratio of voters to the Voting Age Population.

[2] The gaps in the turnout rates of highly and poorly educated citizens can be somewhat exaggerated if, as research has found, the highly educated have a higher propensity to overreport their vote, that is, to say that they voted when in fact they did not (Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001; Karp and Brockington 2005; Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986). However, some underprivileged groups, particularly African Americans, are also more likely to overreport voting (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Sigelman 1982; Traugott and Katosh 1979). Unfortunately, the correlates of overreporting cannot be investigated in most countries because the actual turnout records are not available to researchers.

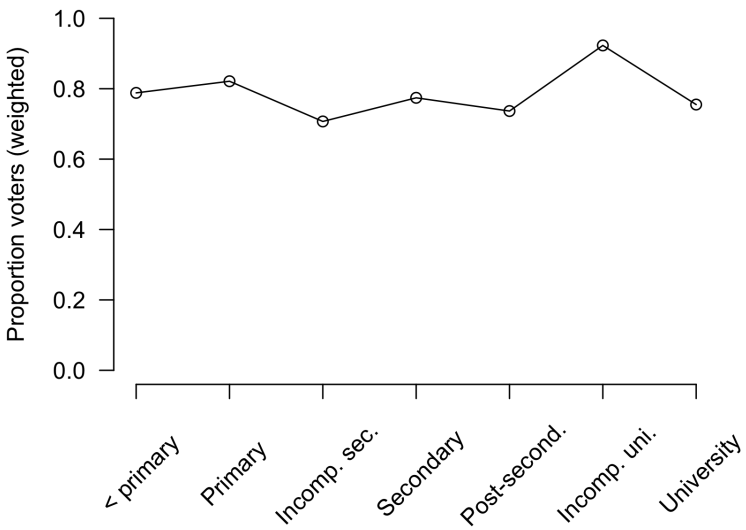

FIGURE 0–2. Reported voter turnout in Spain, 2004 parliamentary election. *Source*: CSES

of advanced industrial democracies (Franklin 2004). Figure 0–2 displays reported voter turnout rates by education level using weighted data from the CSES for the 2004 parliamentary elections, but the same pattern holds for other elections.[3] The contrast with the American case is striking. Fully 79 percent of citizens with less than a primary education and 82 percent of citizens who have completed a primary education report that they voted. The voter turnout rates of people who have higher education levels are very similar: 77 percent of respondents who have finished secondary education and 76 percent of those who have a university degree report that they voted in the parliamentary election.

The discrepancy between the American and the Spanish cases illustrates the claim that voter turnout is not unequal everywhere,

[3] The category "postsecondary education" is included in the Spanish graph, but not in the American. Because of differences in education systems, not all education categories coded by the CSES apply to all countries. For example, no distinction between vocational and university education is made in the United States.

which is to say that turnout is not necessarily unequal. The positive association between education and voter participation is not universal. Instead, it varies across countries, to the extent that education is perhaps the strongest predictor of participation in some elections, but there is no correlation at all in others. True, in the United States and a few other advanced industrial democracies, there are large gaps in the turnout rates of highly and less educated people. On the other hand, in many other contexts, there are literally no differences in turnout rates across education groups. Turnout-egalitarian contexts include very diverse countries in which voter participation rates are not particularly high, such as Spain or South Korea.

An accurate description of voter turnout rates by education level around the world is a necessary first step to understanding unequal participation. The mere existence of variation in the degree to which participation is unequal across contexts is relevant. Rather than being inevitable, unequal participation is contingent on institutional, political, or social characteristics. This insight opens the opportunity for comparative research to analyze why participation is equal in some contexts but not in others. A better understanding of unequal participation can perhaps even shed some light on what can be done to make participation more equal. Conceivably, better knowledge of this phenomenon may suggest ways of increasing the participation of low-status groups where they fail to vote and, in this way, bring us closer to the democratic ideal of equal participation.

Beyond description, the second aim of this book is to improve our understanding of why voter turnout is more unequal in some contexts than others. Only one previous study has attempted to explain cross-national variation in unequal participation at length. Verba, Nie, and Kim's (1978) classic "Participation and political equality: A seven-nation comparison" examined the degree to which socioeconomic status influenced political participation in seven nations. Their main claim was that unequal participation depended upon the degree to which lower-social status groups were affiliated with organizations such as trade unions, associations, and political parties.

This book builds on Verba, Nie, and Kim's (1978) contribution as well as on decades of accumulated comparative political behavior research. I present a general framework within which to think about unequal participation, which focuses on the interaction between individual characteristics and the contexts in which individuals participate in politics. The starting point is the micro-level resource model of political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). People of low socioeconomic status vote less frequently in many contexts, because they have fewer resources and more negative attitudes toward politics. Participation is more costly and less rewarding for them. The second starting point is the macro-level approach to comparative voter turnout research, which claims that variation in aggregate turnout rates across countries can be traced back to a set of contextual characteristics, such as the electoral institutions, socioeconomic factors, or the party systems, that shape the costs and benefits of voting (Geys 2006, Blais 2006).

I propose that it is useful to make a theoretical distinction between contextual factors that affect the costs and benefits of voting in homogenous or in heterogeneous ways, depending on the individual availability of resources and motivation. Some costs and rewards of voting, such as the physical fatigue of going to the polls, affect citizens of all social groups roughly similarly, that is, homogeneously. On the contrary, differences in levels of available resources and motivations can make some individuals more sensitive than others to changes in other contextual features. For example, increases in the cognitive costs of deciding for whom to vote or of dealing with complicated voting procedures are easy to bear for people who have many cognitive resources. Any increases in complexity are, by contrast, much more cognitively taxing to bear for resource-poor individuals. Thus, a contextual-level characteristic that makes voting more cognitively costly should mainly demobilize less educated citizens and enlarge participatory gaps. Likewise, mobilization by political organizations is only a promising means of reducing turnout inequality if efforts to bring people to the polls are disproportionately focused on low-education groups. More generally,

contextual characteristics to which highly and less educated people are heterogeneously responsive will affect turnout inequality, even if their impact on overall turnout rates is small.

A contextual characteristic can also equalize participation if it has homogeneous, but very large, effects on all types of citizens. For example, compulsory voting eliminates turnout inequality because it significantly raises the propensity to vote of all individuals and makes turnout rates approach their upper limit (Lijphart 1997).

By focusing on the interaction between individual citizens and the contexts in which they participate in politics, this work contributes to the growing literature that is progressively relating micro and macro theories of political behavior (e.g., Anduiza 2002; Van Egmond 2003; Franklin 2004; Anderson and Singer 2008; Karp and Banducci 2008; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010; Klingeman 2009). This research program has already established that political behavior depends on both the characteristics of individuals and of the environments in which they live. I add to this literature by specifying under what conditions education, one of the most important individual-level characteristics, has a stronger or weaker influence on participation in elections.

Methodologically, comparative political behavior research on the interaction of individuals and contexts has almost always relied on a combination of survey data and contextual information for a relatively small set of advanced industrial democracies. The framework proposed by this book for understanding unequal participation can be used to generate numerous predictions, a few of which I examine through a combination of methods. I test hypotheses using a combination of survey experiments and cross-national data with a broad geographic scope. Specifically, the analyses conducted here draw on the pooled datasets of the CSES for eighty-five elections held in thirty-six countries.

Researchers increasingly rely on experimental methods, because they allow us to identify causal effects more accurately than traditional methods in the social sciences. In the last few years, there has been growing skepticism in comparative political

behavior research about the validity of work that examines the effects of contexts based on cross-national data. In experimental studies, researchers control how units are assigned to treatments. Random assignment makes it possible to interpret any differences observed across treatment groups as causal effects. This work is one of the first comparative studies to use survey experiments specifically designed to examine how electoral institutions affect political behavior, and for whom.

Although experiments deserve much praise, it is also true that many contextual level variables of interest cannot be manipulated experimentally and the external validity of experimental results is often questionable. Hence, we also need to examine the extent to which the predictions of a theory correspond with the patterns we observe in actual elections. This book makes extensive use of observational cross-national survey data drawing mainly on a large dataset consisting of pooled data that comes from election studies held around the world.

The first chapter describes variation in the levels of unequal participation across countries. In addition, it discusses the results of previous research on education and voting, as well as some of the most relevant methodological considerations that need to be taken into account when studying unequal participation. Detailed description of the levels of unequal turnout in eighty-five elections held in thirty-six countries shows that there is a large degree of variation: Although participation is equal in some contexts, the turnout rates of highly and less educated voters are very similar in others.

The second chapter lays out a simple theoretical framework from which to think about the reasons of variation in unequal turnout that will be used in subsequent chapters. It presents a distinction between contextual characteristics that affect participation homogeneously and heterogeneously and discusses under what conditions turnout can be equal. The potential of contextual-level variables to make participation more equal or more unequal is illustrated by analyzing two relevant institutions that shape turnout inequality: compulsory voting and electoral registration.