Political equality and turnout

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Low turnout is usually considered to be a 'problem'. Most democratic theorists argue that a substantial level of citizen involvement is a requisite of a thriving democracy (Pateman 1970; Cohen 1971; Pennock 1979). This is why Powell (1982) chose to focus on voting participation as the very first standard by which to assess democratic performance.

Low turnout is also considered problematic because it is assumed to entail unequal participation (and high turnout equal participation). While it is well known that some groups turn out less than others (Verba, Nie and Kim 1978), the connection between low turnout and inequality was developed theoretically by Tingsten (1937). He formulated the "law of dispersion", according to which lower overall turnout implies stronger variations in turnout across groups. Equal participation is used as an indicator of the quality of democracy (Armingeon and Schädel 2015: 3). It is posited that all citizens should have an equal voice, regardless of whether they are of high social class or member of the working class, rich or poor, and irrespective of whether they have a PhD or have not finished primary school. The assumption that low turnout results in unequal turnout is examined at some length in section 2.1 below.

In this chapter, we review the literature that has empirically studied the consequences of low turnout for political inequality. We wish to determine which groups are less (more) likely to vote (section 1), whether these groups also tend be less (better) represented in Parliament (section 2), and whether their interests and values are less (better) defended in the actual policies that are adopted and implemented by governments (section 3).

1. Who abstains?

Before studying the consequences of low turnout for political inequality, it is important that we answer the question: Who is less likely to vote? Our focus is on different socio-demographic groups that are more prone to abstain and that are therefore – possibly – disadvantaged in terms of descriptive and substantive representation.

The most systematic analysis of who does and does not vote is Wolfinger and Rosenstone's (1980) seminal book *Who Votes?* Using census data from the United States, they find that age and education are the two strongest correlates of turnout (page 102); the young and the less educated are less likely to vote. Updating this work more than three decades later, Leighley and Nagler (2014) report essentially the same age-related patterns. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) interpreted youth's lower participation as a life cycle effect. A life cycle effect would mean that the same individual will be very likely to abstain when she is young but become more prone to vote as she becomes older. Proponents of the life-cycle theory argue that the likelihood of voting increases with age because experiencing a number of life-cycle effects, such as marriage, and home ownership, increase citizens' utility to vote (Smets 2016). Others have interpreted the correlation between age and turnout as a consequence of the fact that turning out to vote is self-reinforcing (for a review, see Dinas 2012). While the correlation between age and turnout is fairly uncontested, some have argued that observed age effects also reflect generational differences in turnout (Blais et al. 2004; Wass 2007, 2008). Such insights come from studies that analyze long time series of data or panel studies, because cross-sectional data – such as those used by Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) – do not allow distinguishing between age and generational effects. The reason is that at a fixed point in time, age and period effects are perfectly collinear (Dassonneville 2017).

As for education, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) argue that education increases cognitive skills, making it easier to make sense of politics. Education is also thought to enhance gratification, and it is assumed that education makes it easier to overcome

procedural hurdles to register (pages 35-36). The correlation between education and turnout is without dispute, but it is not absolutely clear that education as such 'causes' electoral participation (Persson 2014). This causal mechanism, however, is not a crucial issue for our purposes since the bottom line remains, at the descriptive level, that the less educated are less likely to vote. Perhaps Wolfinger and Rosenstone's (1980) most striking conclusion is that education matters much more than income. In their update of *Who Votes?*, Leighley and Nagler (2014) pay more attention to income inequality, but in line with Wolfinger and Rosenstone, they recognize that education matters more than income (page 66).

In addition to education and income, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) look at occupational groups and they point out that turnout is quite high among two particular groups: farmers and public-sector employees. Subsequent research has not given much attention to turnout differences between occupational groups[1], and so an interesting question is whether these two groups benefit from their higher participation rate.

The work of Wolfinger and Rosentstone (1980) and that of Leighley and Nagler (2014) are confined to the American case, which is clearly not a typical case with respect to turnout. A large body of comparative research on the individual-level determinants of turnout allows validating the findings of the US-based literature in other contexts. Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project in 23 countries (and 33 elections), Nevitte et al. (2009) examine the relationship between socio-economic status and non-voting. They conclude that five SES variables have consistent effects across countries: age, education, income, marital status, and religious attendance. The first three variables are the same that were reported by Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) and Leighley and Nagler (2014). The impact of marital status had also been noted in the American case, and this raises the intriguing issue whether this leads governments to pay

[1] But see Blais, Blake and Dion (1991).

special attention to family issues. The same concern would apply to religion: Does higher turnout of more religious citizens have political ramifications?

Let us finally consider Smets and van Ham's (2013) meta-analysis of individual-level determinants of turnout. Among the many socio-demographic correlates of turnout, the only ones to be systematically supported in the empirical literature[2] are education, age, generation, and organizational membership.

Previous research has thus established unequivocally that the two groups that turn out the least are younger and less educated citizens. The impact of income appears to be more ambiguous. Income matters less than education but at the bivariate level there is clearly a relationship. There is also some evidence that the relationship is not linear and is better described by a step function where the main contrast is between the least affluent and all other citizens. It thus makes sense to not only focus on the young and the less educated, but to add the poor among the groups that systematically turn out at a lower rate.[3]

But we should also keep in mind that some groups exhibit exceptionally high levels of turnout, most especially farmers and public-sector employees, and it is important to determine whether this has consequences in terms of both descriptive and substantive representation.

Finally, it should be pointed out that even though socio-demographic factors such as age, education, and income are systematically correlated with the likelihood of voting, all of

[2] We use a success rate of at least two-thirds in terms of both tests and studies as a criterion of 'systematic support'.

[3] It should be pointed out, however, that this positive correlation between income and turnout appears to be context-dependent. Kasara and Suryanarayan (2015) have argued that the rich are more likely to turn out to vote in states that have strong taxation capacities. In some developing democracies, such as India, the turnout rate of the rich is similar or even lower than that of the poor.

these groups can be successfully mobilized to turn out. Traditionally, partisanship (Converse 1976), but also membership of unions or associations, were found to be effective mobilizers (Verba and Nie 1972). In fact, actively mobilizing turnout seemed a particularly effective way to increase the participation of the less resourceful (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). Over-time changes, such as the decline in partisanship, secularisation, and weaker trade unions imply that mobilization efforts have decreased in most advanced democracies (Gray and Caul 2000). As a result, socio-demographic factors arguably matter even more for differences in participation. But do such differences in turnout also lead to different representation? That is the question to which we turn in the next section.

2. Turnout and representation in Parliament

2.1. Does low turnout lead to inequality?

Equality in participation is thought of as an indicator of the quality of democracy. However, this equality is seemingly in danger – as it is feared that the decline in electoral turnout that can be observed in most advanced democracies (Blais and Rubenson 2013) leads to growing disparities between who turns out to vote and who does not. The previous section has clarified that age is one of the strongest predictors of turnout. Scholars that have investigated inequalities in turnout, however, have focused mostly on stable individual-level characteristics, such as education and income. The focus of this section will therefore be mostly on these covariates of turnout.

The basic intuition behind Tingsten's (1937) 'law of dispersion', that inequalities will be very small when turnout is high, and completely absent under full turnout, is undisputed. What is more disputed is whether disparities are necessarily large when turnout is low? According to Lijphart (1997: 2), low participation 'means unequal and socio-economically biased participation'. But is low turnout, and a decline in turnout, almost mechanically, related to growing inequalities in electoral participation? If the trend towards abstention is concentrated among, e.g., the poor, the implication is that

participation will indeed be more unequal. However, if all groups of citizens are equally affected by a decline in turnout, socio-economic biases in turnout will be roughly stable regardless of the overall level of turnout. To illustrate these possibilities, we present in Figure 1 two stylized examples of the probability that different groups of citizens turn out to vote in low and high turnout elections.

For the purpose of illustration, we focus on differences between rich citizens (red lines in Figure 1) and poor citizens (blue lines). We start by looking at the scenario in the left panel of Figure 1. First, we see that the poor have a lower probability to vote (Pr(turnout)) than the rich, which is consistent with what we know about the determinants of turnout. Second, in this example, the gap in turnout between the poor and the rich is the same regardless of whether it is a low or a high turnout election. The different turnout rate could, for example, be a result of a difference in competitiveness of the elections. And in the scenario to the left, this difference in competitiveness affects the probability that a rich citizen turns out to vote in the same way as it affects the probability that a poor citizen votes.

That changes in the second scenario (the right-hand panel in Figure 1). Here as well we see, first, that the rich (red) have a higher probability of voting than the poor (blue). The difference between the turnout rate of the rich and the poor, however, is much larger in a low turnout election than it is under a high turnout election. Assuming once more that differences in competitiveness cause the different turnout rates, in the scenario to the right, this different level of competitiveness affects the poor more than it affects the rich. While the rich are somewhat less likely to vote in a low competitive election, the poor are much less likely to vote when competitiveness is low. As a result, in this second scenario, the turnout gap between the rich and the poor is larger under low turnout than it is under high turnout.

Figure 1. Stylized examples of the impact of the decline in turnout

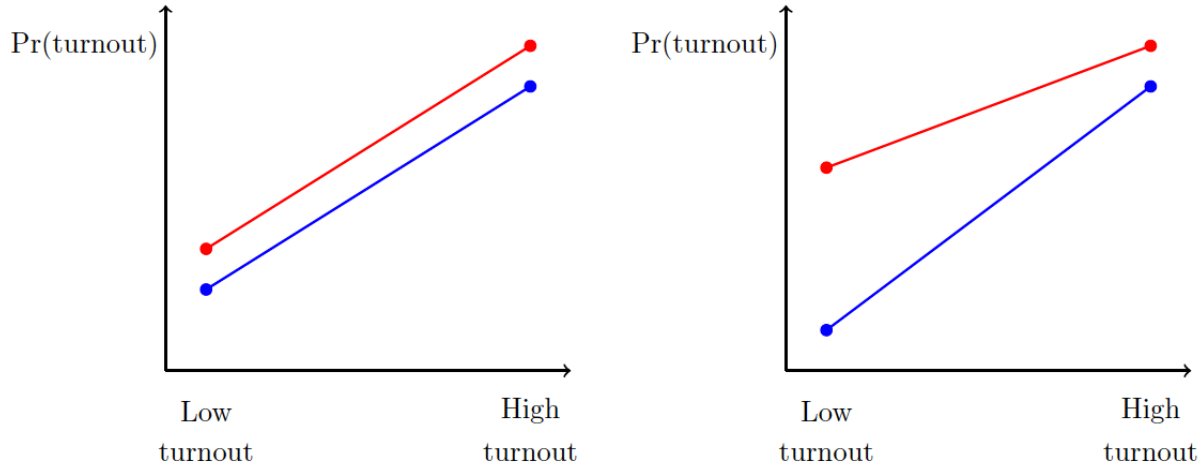

Figure 1 presents two stylized examples of the relationship between turnout rates and inequalities in turnout. We now review empirical research on this topic to evaluate which of these two scenarios – the left panel or the right panel – is closer to reality.

The available empirical evidence does not unequivocally support the idea that inequalities in turnout, in terms of social class, income, or education, are more important when turnout is low. Studying class and education inequalities in turnout in the United States and in Europe, Sinnott and Achen (2008) find that the working class and the lower educated are less likely to turn out to vote. However, they do not find evidence that these groups are *more* disadvantaged in low turnout elections in the United States. Their analyses of European data are somewhat more supportive of the idea that lower turnout increases inequalities, though in Europe as well differences appear to be modest. Kostelka's (2014) analyses cast further doubt on Lijphart's concern that inequalities are more pronounced when turnout is low. Focusing on low turnout elections in Central and East European post-communist countries and comparing the socio-demographic characteristics of voters with those of the full adult population, he finds that the lowest educated and low-income groups are underrepresented. However, he qualifies the size of the socio-demographic bias in turnout as 'not impressive' (Kostelka 2014: 955). This

bias, furthermore, is not larger in the low turnout elections in post-communist countries than it is in established democracies in Western Europe, where turnout is substantially higher. The findings of Sinnott and Achen (2008) and those of Kostelka (2014), therefore, are fairly consistent with the left-hand scenario in Figure 1. While there are systematic socio-demographic biases in turnout, disparities do not seem to be (much) more pronounced when turnout is low.

Other works offer evidence that is more in line with the right-hand panel in Figure 1. Studying the consequences of the decline in turnout in ten established democracies that have long time series of national election study data, Dalton (2017) finds that the effect of education on turnout has increased in all but one country.[4] Similarly, Armingeon and Schädel (2015), who study the determinants of turnout in eight Western European countries between 1956 and 2009, find that turnout has not only declined, but also become more unequal. Focusing on the effect of educational attainment on electoral participation, they conclude that 'the lower social strata tend to withdraw more from politics' (Armingeon and Schädel 2015: 11). This observation of a widening gap in turnout rates does not seem to be limited to Western democracies, as Northmore-Ball (2016) shows that the effect of education on participation has increased over time in Eastern Europe as well. Further evidence comes from Dassonneville and Hooghe (2017). Studying the impact of educational attainment on turnout in Western Europe, they find that the education gap increases over time, implying that participation is becoming more unequal. In addition, analyzing the impact of the abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands in 1970 – a reform that was associated with a 16 percentage points decline in turnout – they show that educational attainment becomes a significant predictor of turnout after the reform. These results are consistent with the right-hand side scenario in Figure 1.

[4] The countries included in Dalton's analysis are Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. The effect of education on turnout increases over time in all countries except for the United Kingdom.

Other works have directly compared the determinants of participation in low and high turnout elections. Persson et al. (2013) study the determinants of turnout in the 2010 Swedish county council elections. Because of irregularities in the county of Västra Götaland, a re-election was organized in 2011 in each of the five constituencies of this country. The 2010 election was organized simultaneously with the national and local elections, which resulted in a high turnout of 80.6%. Turnout for the 2011 re-election, in contrast, was only 44.1% (Persson et al. 2013). This sharp decline in turnout appears to have been associated with larger disparities in turnout. Studying the effect of income in both elections, Persson et al. (2013: 180) report that the 'difference in voter turnout between the poorest and richest was about 15 percentage points in 2010 and about 20 percentage points in 2011'. The difference between the two elections is even more pronounced when looking at education. The turnout gap between voters with seven years of schooling and voters with 16 years of schooling, increased from 19 percentage points in 2010 to 32 percentage points in 2011. Bhatti et al. (2019) come to a similar conclusion. They study the determinants of turnout in local, national, and European elections in Denmark. Bhatti et al. use a massive panel dataset with information about 2.1 million citizens and validated turnout rates for the 2013 local elections (turnout rate 71.9%), the 2014 European elections (56.3%) and the 2015 national elections (85.9%). They find stark differences in the impact of education between the three elections, and these differences are consistent with the expectation that disparities are stronger when turnout is lower. More specifically, they find that turnout gap between the lowest and the highest educated[5] is 16 percentage points in the high turnout national elections, 22 percent in the local elections, and 33 percent in the low turnout European elections. Clearly, the analyses from Persson et al. (2013) and those of Bhatti et al. (2019) suggest that when turnout is lower, inequalities are larger, just as Lijphart argued.

[5] They compare citizens who have only completed elementary school with those who completed more than five years of higher education.

The most comprehensive analysis of inequalities in turnout, is probably Gallego's (2015) work on the topic. Comparing the effect of educational attainment on participation in different countries for which the CSES project provides data, she finds that 'gaps in the participation rates of highly and less educated people are very small or non-existent in countries in which turnout rates are near the 100 percent participation ceiling' (Gallego, 2015: 53). In countries where turnout is very low (55 percent or less), in contrast, educational attainment has a strong impact on electoral participation. However, for elections that fall in-between these extremes, Gallego (2015) finds that there is almost no connection between the level of turnout and the size of bias in educational attainment. The overall correlation between biased participation and turnout levels, is thus mostly driven by extreme cases. According to Gallego (2015), the absence of a clear relation between turnout levels and turnout inequality – when disregarding very low and very high turnout elections – is a result of the heterogeneous effect of contextual factors that influence turnout. As an example, Gallego (2015) shows that increasing the cognitive cost of voting by changing the ballot structure decreases turnout more among the lower educated than the higher educated.

In summary, there seems to be some ground for the fear that low turnout, and a decline in turnout, rates will increase inequalities in participation. Scholars who have compared the determinants of turnout in low and high turnout elections find that biases are systematically larger in the former. Inequalities in educational attainment in particular appear to be larger in low turnout elections. The second scenario in Figure 1 thus seems to hold some truth. However, previous research also adds nuance to this basic observation; most variation in turnout across educational groups is small, and such variation will have little impact on the bias in electoral participation.

2.2. Are electoral outcomes different when turnout is low?

When turnout is low, it is the poor and the lower educated in particular who disproportionally drop out of voting. Such differential turnout rates, however, are not by

definition detrimental for the representation of low income and lower education groups. Their representation will only suffer from low turnout rates if the party preferences and voting behavior of members of the lower social strata – who tend to abstain – differ from the preferences of those who do turn out to vote.

Scholars who have studied this question have mostly – but not exclusively – focused on analyzing whether the Democratic party in the US, and left-wing parties in a European context, suffer from low turnout rates (Brunell and DiNardo 2004; Martinez and Gill 2005; Pacek and Radcliff 1995; Lutz 2007). The assumption of this stream of research is that left-of-center parties will better represent the interests of the working class, the poor, and the lower educated. If such parties indeed fare less well when turnout is low, the implication is that unequal participation also entails unequal representation in Parliament.

A number of studies find evidence that is in line with this basic assumption. Analyses that simulate the election outcome under full turnout in the United States, for example, indicate that Democrats would do better under high turnout. This effect, however, seems quite variable (Brunell and DiNardo 2004; Martinez and Gill 2005), is generally small (Highton and Wolfinger 2001) and it rarely changes the outcome of an election (Citrin et al. 2003). Others have shown that left-of-center parties would benefit, or have benefited, from high turnout in countries in Europe (Kohler 2011; Pacek and Radcliff 1995). Furthermore, a simulation based on survey data in Australia – where voting is compulsory – suggest that the decline in turnout that would follow from abolishing compulsory voting would lead the left-wing party Labour to lose votes (Mackerras and McAllister 1999). Focusing on Australia as well but exploiting variation in the introduction of compulsory voting between states, Fowler (2013) also finds that Labour benefits from higher turnout under compulsory voting.

Others confirm that changes in turnout rates can alter the outcome of elections, but they disagree on who benefits from high turnout. Lutz (2007), for example, finds that right-of-

center parties benefit from high turnout in Switzerland, while McAllister and Mughan (1986) find that not Labour but the British Liberals fare better under high turnout. Bernhagen and Marsh (2007), for their part, find that high turnout does not systematically advantage parties of a particular ideological leanings, but small parties and non-incumbents do benefit from high turnout. This is also consistent with DeNardo's (1980) theoretical expectation that the out-party benefits from high turnout.

Adding further uncertainty to the direction of the partisan effects of low turnout, a large number of publications report mixed, or null results. Van der Eijk and van Egmond (2007), who study turnout effects in European Parliament elections, find that partisan differences are extremely small, and 'virtually unrelated to substantively interesting characteristics of parties or contexts' (Van der Eijk and van Egmond 2007: 571). Analyzing the impact of full turnout in the 2000 Canadian federal election, Rubenson et al. (2007) also find very little evidence of an impact on parties' electoral success. Works that have studied the effects of exogenous shocks in turnout as well have sometimes produced mixed results. Miller and Dassonneville (2016), who study the partisan effects of the abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands, show that the Social democratic party benefited from the decline in turnout, while small left-wing parties suffered. Ferwerda (2013), who leverages over-time variation in the abolition of compulsory voting in Austria, also finds that the Social democratic party did somewhat better after the repeal of compulsory voting, while minor parties slightly lost. His reading of the evidence, however, is that differences are substantively extremely small.

Even though the poor and the lower educated are less likely to turn out to vote – in particular in low turnout elections, it seems as if left-of-center parties are not doing worse when turnout is low. Why is the effect so small? Scholars have pointed to two explanations, that can be complementary. First, it has been argued that the absence of a clear partisan effect of low turnout is a consequence of the fact that the preferences and opinions of abstainers are not that different from those of voters. There is no clear

indication, therefore, that abstainers prefer the more progressive policies that left-of-center parties stand for (Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Rubenson et al. 2007; van der Eijk and van Egmond 2007). Second, contextual factors – and electoral rules in particular – have an impact on the size of partisan effects. According to Ferwerda (2014), in order for a decline in turnout to translate into 'a meaningful loss in party vote share, there must simultaneously be a large decline in turnout between elections as well as a large skew in preferences between the voting and non-voting population'. Ferwerda (2014) argues that the combination of both is very rare. A first reason is that declines in turnout are generally fairly modest. Secondly, a large skew in party preferences is unlikely when there are multiple parties, which holds especially in fragmented party systems. As a result, a decline in turnout levels only rarely alters the outcome of an election.

3. Turnout and substantive representation

Although voter turnout does not systematically affect election outcomes, there is solid evidence that it does exert a sensible effect on public policy. A large body of research shows that the level of electoral participation matters for redistribution and welfare and for the quality of the democratic process.

3.1 Turnout and redistribution

If voter turnout usually does not influence who wins an election, can it alter public policy? In terms of redistributive policies, the underlying theory draws on an extension of the Downsian spatial model (Downs 1957) by Meltzer and Richard (1981). In a unidimensional space and under a majoritarian rule, the preference of the median voter is decisive for building a winning majority. Simultaneously, in the population, income is typically positively skewed (mean > median). The median voter's preference for redistribution is thus likely to be proportional to the distance between her income and the population mean. While the (pre-tax and pre-transfer) population mean reflects the country's wealth, the level of the median's voter income, and her preferences for

redistribution, depend on voter turnout. As long as Tingsten's law of dispersion applies, the higher voter turnout, the lower will be the median voter's income (i.e. low-income citizens vote), and the stronger will be the demand for redistribution.

The reason why changes in participation rates may public policies without altering election results (cf. section 2.2) is that political parties adapt their manifestoes to the effective electorate and its preferences (Toka 2004: 1; Birch 2009: 128). Pontusson and Rueda (2010) demonstrate that, in established democracies, left-wing parties' positions shift to the left as voter turnout (and low-income voters' participation) increases. Of course, such shift occur only if parties are office-seekers. Accordingly, Bechtel et al. (2016) study voting in Swiss referenda (1908-1970) and find that compulsory voting (and thus higher turnout) had significant partisan consequences on referenda outcomes. The electoral compulsion boosted support for positions defended by the Swiss Social Democratic Party by up to 20 percentage points.

The hypothesized positive association between voter turnout and redistribution has been generally confirmed by the empirical literature. In particular, a large number of studies find that, in the U.S. states, an income bias in turnout, which is a typical corollary of low turnout, is associated with more stringent welfare policies, smaller government expenditure, and larger income inequality (Hill and Leighly 1992; Hill et al. 1995; Husted and Kenny 1997; Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Avery 2015).

Work that has shown a link between turnout and redistribution, however, may be criticized for a number of reasons. First, one could object that what matters in the specific U.S. context, where much of the research is based, is campaign funding (see Bartels 2008: 280, Gilens 2012: chapter 8). This factor is usually not controlled for in the existing studies, and it may be correlated with the income bias in voter turnout. Yet, there is overwhelming comparative evidence on the positive effect of high turnout on the generosity of redistribution. And this evidence includes work on countries where political parties are

publicly funded (Hicks and Swank 1992; Lindert 1996, Iversen and Cusak 2000; Franseze 2002: 103; Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005; Chong and Olivera 2008; Mahler 2008 and 2010; Fumagalli and Narciso 2012).

Second, critics are concerned with the potential presence of endogeneity in work that links turnout and redistribution, or even reverse causality as inequality may hinder participation (Solt 2008 and 2010; but see Stockemer and Scruggs 2012). Such concerns can be addressed by ingenuous strategies instrumenting turnout. For example, Aggeborn (2016) leverages the 1970 reform in Sweden that changed the election calendar to hold local and national election simultaneously. The resulting increase in turnout in local elections provoked a sudden surge in government spending in Swedish municipalities, in sharp contrast to the stability in spending that was observed in neighboring Finland. Further evidence comes from Australia, where the adoption of compulsory voting (and rise in turnout) in the 1920s seems to have increased pension spending well above the level in other comparable OECD countries (Fowler 2013).

Third, the relationship between changes in turnout and redistributive policies is unlikely to be linear. The effects of small changes in turnout on the electorate's preferences may sometimes go almost unnoticed, and thus fail to significantly alter public policies – especially in the short term.[6] Conversely, large changes in turnout or changes affecting voters with a clearly distinct set of preferences sometimes may trigger sweeping reforms. A case in point are historical extensions of suffrage that have increased absolute turnout (expressed as share of the total population). Social science research provides robust evidence on how, in various contexts and periods, the (effective) enfranchisement of lower-class citizens (Acemoglu and Robinson 2000; Linder 2004; Aidt and Jensen 2009), women (Aid et al. 2006; Miller 2008; Bertocchi 2011), ethnic minorities (Naidu 2012), and

[6] This is probably one of the reasons why a small number of studies do not find an association between turnout and redistributive policies (e.g. Barnes 2014, Hofmann 2017). Another reason is that, in some cases, politicians may resist the pressure for redistribution by capitalizing on flaws in public opinion formation and by emphasizing other (e.g. symbolical, cultural, and societal) issues (e.g. Bartels 2005; Hacker and Pierson 2014).

non-citizens (Vernby 2013) resulted in additional public expenditure benefiting these, legally circumscribed and previously excluded, groups.

Overall, despite the minor caveats, it is clear that politicians care who votes and they seem to know who participates and who does not, which, in most cases, affects welfare and redistributive policies. This is also shown by geographic disparities in public spending. In the United States, members of the Congress strategically allocate funds to those areas within their electoral districts that vote at higher rates (Martin 2003). Similarly, in Mexico, voter turnout at the municipal level accounts for sewage and water coverage (Clearly 2007).

3.3 Turnout and the quality of democracy

Voter turnout not only matters for who gets what in democracies. There also is evidence that turnout influences the quality of the democratic process. Following Manin et al. (1999) and Roberts (2010), democratic quality can be understood as the strength and nature of linkages between elected public officials and the electorate.

In the United States, Martin and Claibourn (2013) argue that legislators use turnout as a cue for the degree of public scrutiny. The higher the level of electoral participation, the more legislators care about citizens' preferences. Martin and Claibourn validate this hypothesis by means of an analysis of nearly four decades of legislative politics in the U.S. House of Representatives. They show that legislative districts with higher voting rates exhibit greater policy responsiveness. Similar findings are obtained by a series of distinct analyses that focus at the level of local communities. Verba and Nie (1972), Hansen (1975), and Hill and Matsubayashi (2005) all demonstrate that voter turnout is associated with mass-elite agenda agreement. These results suggest that, in local politics too, the higher turnout, the better information politicians have about citizens' preferences and the more pressure they feel to follow these preferences.

Other research shows that, particularly in developing democracies, high turnout may favor universalistic and programmatic party competition as opposed to clientelism and patronage. Nooruddin and Simmon (2015) show, through their empirical analyses of spending patterns in Indian states, a negative effect of participation on private spending and a positive effect on public spending. Similarly, Nathan (2019) studies political behavior in Ghana and argues that the low turnout of urban elites helps perpetuate the vicious circle of the country's particularistic and patronage-based electoral politics.

4. Conclusion

We have shown that the youth, the lower educated and the poor are less likely to vote. Furthermore, considerable research finds that these groups disproportionally drop out of voting in low turnout elections, though this is mostly limited to established democracies. A substantial number of studies have looked at the political repercussions of this lower turnout. The usual assumption is that a lower turnout means greater inequality, that is, fewer votes for leftist parties and policies that disadvantage these groups.

Focusing on partisan effects of low turnout first, the empirical evidence that we have summarized in this chapter does not consistently support the assumption that low turnout disadvantages the left. Regarding the policy consequences of low turnout, the empirical findings are not entirely consistent, but the bulk of the evidence does suggest that high (low) turnout contributes to more (less) redistribution. There is also some support for the hypothesis that a higher turnout may foster greater policy responsiveness.

We note, however, that little attention has been paid to the political consequences of low youth turnout. We do not know, for instance, if politicians are less prone to invest in education if and when they know that younger citizens are prone to abstain. We also know little about the consequences of high turnout among specific occupational groups. Are politicians paying more attention to the demands of farmers and public-sector

employees, because these groups are much more inclined to vote?[7] Future research should address these issues while disentangling the effect of voter turnout from those of other types of political participation (e.g. protesting, campaign contributions) and the influence of organized interests.

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[7] See Blais et al. (1997) for an examination of the link between public sector employees and leftist parties.

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