

Why Do People Vote?

Examining the Determinants of Electoral Participation in the World's Democracies

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of electoral system type on electoral participation in the world's democracies, as well as other influencing factors in a comprehensive empirical study. The primary hypothesis suggesting a link between electoral system type and electoral participation is tested empirically, along with the influence of other factors effecting participation. Does there exist an ideal electoral system to maximum electoral participation? Or is electoral system even the determining factor in this regard?

Why do people vote? This particular question has preoccupied political scientists since the advent of the discipline and, despite numerous studies examining the factors affecting electoral participation (i.e. voter turnout), there is little consensus as to what motivates citizens to vote. In the world's electoral democracies, voting is the mechanism through which citizens choose the men and women who craft the laws that impact their daily lives. But the incidence of voting is not universal throughout the world. All democracies certainly are not the same and, as such, their levels of voter participation vary as widely as their methods of electing representatives. Understanding the dynamics that impact this electoral participation, then, will enable political scientists to focus on the various factors and motivations that can encourage greater electoral participation. For many, this electoral participation is the fundamental definition of a democracy. If we can understand its implications and the environment within which it is best cultivated, we will know the ingredients necessary for a more vibrant democracy. Greater electoral participation, it is assumed by some, could lead to a more fruitful and representative democracy.

The question of electoral participation demands a much more detailed examination than that provided by former U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle, who's groundbreaking observation noted that "a low voter turnout is an indication of fewer people going to the polls." But why do people "go to the polls" in the first place? What can we learn from the past electoral experiences of democracies that will help us increase electoral participation in future elections? Specifically, the study that follows is concerned with the question of what type of electoral system generates greater electoral participation and what other factors, aside from electoral system type, may impact such participation.

Review of Existing Literature

While there exists a plethora of literature in the field concerning electoral system type and electoral participation, this literature tends to be lacking in its depth of examining the relationship between these variables and other factors affecting this relationship. While these factors are numerous, the literature on this topic seems to avoid introducing and examining the impact of a group of variables on electoral participation. Namely, a number of scholars have addressed electoral participation and how it is affected by variables such as a nation-state's socioeconomic development, electoral system type, welfare policy, party loyalty, or media culture. Likewise, bivariate relationships listing electoral system type as an independent variable are limited in scope and avoid addressing the complex relationship this variable has with electoral participation and other factors in democratic nation-states. And rarely are these factors considered *en bloc* and weighed with and against one another.

Conceptualizing a variable such as electoral participation is relatively straightforward and therefore uniform throughout the scholarly literature reviewed in preparation for this analysis—a variable derived from the percentage of registered voters who actually voted in a given election. Variance exists within the literature, however, concerning the length of time during which to observe electoral participation and the type of elections from which data is drawn. For example, Pippa Norris bases her observation of vote totals on 10 years of data (Norris 1997) while Kenneth Goldstein relies upon 40 years of electoral data (Goldstein 2002). Others base their data on number of elections as opposed to number of years (Power and Roberts 1995). The type of elections used to calculate levels of participation also varies from scholar to scholar, with some using primarily legislative or parliamentary election results, some presidential/executive, and others a combination of the two. In addition, some scholars choose to focus on turnout

exclusively in the United States or Europe, while others embark on a wider, comparative examination. While the conceptualization and operationalization of electoral participation as a dependent variable is straight forward, the proposed factors influencing electoral participation, however, are not quite as clear.

A significant amount of research in which electoral participation serves as the dependent variable of a proposed bivariate relationship seems to place socioeconomic development alone as the main independent variable. That is, electoral participation is seen to be greater in democracies with greater socioeconomic development (Hale 2005, Jackman 1987, Lewis-Beck 2000, Patterson & Caldeira 1983, Radcliffe 1992, Weatherford 1978). A survey of literature proposing such a relationship generally excludes a serious consideration of other factors impacting this dyadic model.

Some, however, do acknowledge that an increase in socioeconomic development could simply coincide with an increase in other variables such as level of democratization. Such a supposition, however, is only provided fleeting reference and is denied any empirical testing. Just as Samuel Huntington's well-known article identifying socioeconomic concerns as the determinants of democratization is taken as *prima facie* evidence of a relationship, a great amount of research on this question accepts the veracity of the notion that socioeconomic development is the key determinant of electoral participation.

While no other variable is introduced seriously into this equation, there are scholars who examine a bivariate relationship between electoral participation and factors other than socioeconomic development (Brady 1995). In addition, some scholars suggest a link between government policies inclined to redistribute wealth and an increase in electoral participation (Mahler 2008). Closely related to this issue are levels of industrialization and democratization.

The literature handles each of these two variables—socioeconomic development and democratization—as distinctly separate with their own impacts on electoral participation (Kostadinova 2003). Using level of democratization as an independent variable, Kostadinova and Power (2007) embark upon a comparative case study of Latin American and Eastern European democracies. In measuring electoral participation over time since a country achieved democracy, these authors conclude that electoral participation actually declines the longer a country remains a democracy. The underlying assumption, then, suggests that a certain excitement follows initial democratization that motivates voters to participate in electoral politics. Over an extended period of time, however, complacency settles in (Powell 1995). But yet again, these studies examine little beyond the level of democratization—failing to embark upon a complex examination of third variables and factors that could render the proposed relationship spurious.

Since political parties serve as key electoral factors in most democracies, matters relating to parties are particularly important in the literature. Political scientists have also identified degree of party identification in its own right as an independent variable affecting electoral participation. But this involves an individual level of analysis rather than using nation-states as the unit of analysis. Widespread research indicates that voters are focused more on individual candidates and their qualities over their affiliation with a political party (Beck 1986, Campbell 1960: 121). Party identification serves as the sole independent variable, although it is acknowledged in the literature that other factors have a significant impact on party identification, such as early childhood socialization and familial background (Campbell 1960, Jennings & Niemi 1974). But as voters become “dealigned” (i.e., move away from party affiliation) their enthusiasm seems to wane and so too does electoral participation (Clarke 1998).

Some scholars also identify the degree of political fragmentation as a determinant for electoral participation. Unlike the effect of socioeconomic development, consensus on this topic is mixed. In a case study of municipal elections in Finland, Benny Geys and Bruno Heyndels conclude that a greater number of political parties decreases electoral participation (2006, Jackman 1987). In reaching such a conclusion, Geys and Heyndels examine fragmentation through two lenses—the number of political parties and the size inequalities among those parties—to determine that, while size inequality increases turnout, this increase is insignificant in countries with more political parties. The authors do make passing reference to the fact that proportional representation electoral systems tend to have a greater number of political parties, but they stop short of making a nomothetic argument about the direct effect of the electoral system and other factors on electoral participation. Their implication, however, is clear: proportional systems have a greater number of political parties and, as a result, should have greater electoral participation.

On the other end of the spectrum, some scholars examine the convergence of political parties as having an impact on electoral participation. Voter choice is presented in exchange theory terms: in contributing their vote to a specific candidate, voters seek the greatest benefit derived from the “cost” of their vote (Downs 1997). But these scholars suggest that “voters who are alienated from politics because no candidate is close to their preferred position might choose to abstain” (Adams & Merrill 2003). Candidates, then, who converge toward the center of the electorate move further away from the fringe elements in their own party. What results is voter alienation. Alienation, in turn, leads to a lack of willingness to vote for a specific candidate (Adams 2003).

As with other variables under scholarly review, however, links with convergence/fragmentation and electoral participation remain lacking and any empirical examination seems weak at best and absent at worst. In order to accommodate their hypotheses, these scholars (namely Grofman and Adams) attempt to expand the conceptualization of electoral system to include campaign activism. But even then, the exploration still includes a simple relationship involving only two primary variables that fails to examine alternative explanations. And such abstract factors such as “campaign activism” are exceedingly difficult to test empirically with any degree of accuracy or objectivity.

Much attention has certainly been granted to electoral participation as a dependent variable. But this attention is relatively limited in scope as well. The primary focus of research has been on dyads that narrow the hypothesis to one other variable impacting electoral participation. There is little research to paint a clear portrait of the complex web of variables surrounding electoral participation or to discount other competing models.

Research focused on electoral systems seems to be an attempt to identify the “best” system for democratic nation-states. Electoral system type, however, is a variable difficult to conceptualize. Douglas Rae identifies it as the “matrix of competitive relationships between ...the labeled groups which compete for the right to govern” (1967: 47). There are multiple ways to categorize and label the world’s electoral systems and the literature on this topic proves this fact. Some authors simply break them into three groups: proportional, winner-take-all, and mixed (Norris 1997). Proportional systems involve some measure whereby seats are divided according to the number of votes cast for a party list. Instead of candidates, voters in these systems typical vote on groups of candidates, or parties. Winner-take-all systems, as the name suggests, has primarily single-member districts in which only one candidate can win the seat. Usually, this

requires a mere plurality of the vote, however some systems require run-offs where it is necessary to obtain fifty-percent plus one of the vote total. There are certainly complex subcategories under each of these headings, such as closed-list proportional, preferential list, etc. (Gallagher & Mitchell 2005, Lijphart 1995, Rae 1967). But there is a general understanding that the primary distinctions among electoral systems rest along the lines of the three categories identified by Norris: proportional, winner-take-all, and mixed. Since this type of categorization is found primarily in legislative elections, these are the focus of a majority of the research in the field.

As an independent variable, the literature suggests electoral system type impacts a number of issues. One such issue is that of political party strength. In his seminal work on this topic, Douglas Rae finds that stronger parties are at a greater advantage in proportional systems as opposed to majoritarian systems, acting “as brakes upon fractionalization of party systems by favoring a few strong parties at the expense of many weaker ones” (1967: 69). At the same time, however, he acknowledges that no electoral system “positively accelerated” the development of minor parties.

Related to this concern is disproportional representation—an issue which scholars link to the type of electoral system. Scholars define such disproportionality as a discrepancy between the percentage of votes received by a political party and the percentage of representatives seats the political party holds in the legislative branch (Rae 1987, Lijphart 1995). While scholars acknowledge that all electoral systems at least aim for some proportionality, they do not accomplish this goal equally (Lijphart 1995). As its name would suggest, proportional electoral systems hold the overwhelming empirical edge in creating a legislative body whose composition

most closely resembles the vote of the electorate as a whole, whereas the majoritarian/plurality system most loosely bears this resemblance (Rae 1967, Lijphart 1995, Norris 1997).

Similarly, it is believed that this fact of proportional systems also enables greater representation of diverse social groups in legislative bodies. Since parties must compile a list of multiple candidates in proportional systems, they may be compelled to produce a representative, diverse selection of candidates. Women, for example, are better represented in proportional systems because of what amounts to affirmative action on the part of political parties filling their preferred lists of candidates (Norris 1997).

As an independent variable, electoral system also impacts the number of political parties in a nation-state. The broad consensus holds that proportional and mixed systems provide a larger framework within which more parties have a chance to succeed, while the restrictive nature of winner-take-all systems make it all but impossible for minor parties to acquire an effective number of seats (Rae 1987, Lijphart 1995).

An electoral system's effect on electoral participation outside of these variables is certainly granted reference in the existing literature. Scholars tend to agree that proportional systems generate greater turnout than do winner-take-all systems (Norris 1997, Jackman 1987, Powell 1982, Black 1991). The explanations for this observation are mixed, although they revolve around the notion that there are fewer "wasted votes" in this system and a greater number of political parties from which to choose (Norris 1997: 309). That is, in a proportional system, voters feel their vote has a greater chance of "making a difference" and as a result are more inclined to participate in the election.

More specific considerations were also weighed as being influenced by the type of electoral system. Namely, some scholars believe the responsiveness of elected officials to their

constituents' concerns is impacted by the type of electoral system in which they were elected. This is one category in which the winner-take-all system actually outperforms the other types of electoral systems. Since elected officials represent a specific district in the winner-take-all system and serve as the only elected representative for that constituency, they have more incentive to focus on and emphasize that type of constituent casework (Norris 1997, Bogdanor 1985).

Electoral system as a variable is not granted quite the same amount of attention as electoral participation. And the two variables seem relatively detached in most of the literature. Unlike the variables with which electoral participation is often paired in a causal model, the variables impacted by the type of electoral system were less empirical and more substantive. In addition, they are limited in scope and scale (i.e., number of political parties vs. socioeconomic development). While scholars exploring electoral participation seem concerned with finding its causes and seeking ways to impact it, the examination of electoral systems seems to be driven by mere intrigue or a futile attempt to find the "best system." No scholar has succeeded in that particular mission.

A broad array of literature on both electoral participation and electoral systems as variables contributes to the research in the field. This research, however, is limited to relatively simplistic examinations and explanations of bivariate relationships. Thus far scholars have avoided combining elements impacting electoral participation and electoral systems. Instead, they embrace one single explanatory factor and either ignore the rest or only provide them minor reference. That, then, is what we are attempting to change in this study.

Research Question

Based both on the existing literature and the conventional wisdom of political science presuppositions, the hypothesis under scrutiny is that electoral system type influences electoral participation such that proportional electoral systems foster greater electoral participation. It is assumed in the field that proportional systems allow more weight and, in turn, more meaning to an individual's vote. As such, a citizen in a democracy which employs a proportional system will be more inclined to vote. In examining this nomothetic proposition, we will explore other variables which may affect this covariational relationship such as socioeconomic development, level of democratization, and the presence of compulsory electoral laws.

Research Design & Methodology

The units of analysis in this research will be nation-states, since they clearly possess both an electoral system and a measurable level of electoral participation—as well as the other variables under examination. In the umbrella relationship outlined above, the electoral system will serve as the independent variable, while electoral participation will be the dependent variable, as indicated below:

Electoral System Type \longrightarrow Electoral Participation

All of the world's nation-states are certainly not democracies. And since elections serve as the fundamental pillar in the definition of a democracy, we will only examine those nation-states identified by Freedom House as “electoral democracies.” As an independent, non-governmental organization rating nations-states around the world based upon a comprehensive scale measuring their political and social freedoms, Freedom House serves as the international gold standard for identifying democracies. While the organization is known best for its numerical

ratings of nation-states, it also assigns the designation “electoral democracy” to those countries satisfying the following criteria:

- 1) A competitive, multiparty political system;
- 2) Universal adult suffrage;
- 3) Regularly contested elections with secret ballot voting;
- 4) Public access of opposition parties; and
- 5) The authority for national decisions must rest in the hands of an individual of legislative body that is elected by the citizens.

According to these criteria, Freedom House identifies 119 electoral democracies in 2009 (see Appendix). This research, however, will include all but two of these nation-states. Papua New Guinea was excluded from the study because it has only experienced one valid legislative election in the past ten years—in 2007. The results of the 2002 election were invalidated after balloting was marred by violence and corruption. Furthermore, voter turnout data from the single elections in 2007 were not available—any data from the election seemed too sporadic to count as sound empirical data for this research (IPU). In addition, the Union of Comoros—one of only two Arab World nations on the Freedom House list—was excluded because no voter turnout data was reported or available for any legislative elections in the past ten years. Only the presidential election information was available for Comoros and, to assure the congruency of the data in this research, that could not be included in the final tabulation. These two minor exclusions, however, should have no significant statistical implications for our research design. The remaining 117 electoral democracies serve as a sufficient universe from which to test our hypothesis and draw reasonable conclusions about the electoral democracies as a whole.

The independent variable—electoral system type—is defined conceptually as the institutionalized, legal method by which nation-states conducting free and fair elections (i.e., those nation-states identified as electoral democracies by Freedom House selected for this universe) determine the allocation of votes and the outcome of elections for seats to the lower house of the nation-state’s legislative body. Specifically, we will be concerned with the tallying method of the votes. Proportional systems allow for an outcome with multiple “winners” whereas winner-take-all systems (or plurality systems) allow for only a single winner per election per district. Mixed systems present a combination of both methods, varying based upon location and constituency. The electoral system designation of each nation-state is derived from the comprehensive database of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). While there are different forms of each type of electoral system, this paper will classify nation-states into three categories: proportional, or multi-winner, systems; winner-take-all, or plurality, systems; and mixed systems—a combination between the two.

The level of electoral participation will be defined conceptually as the degree to which voters are engaged and involved in the electoral process, based solely on voter turnout. The IDEA maintains an exhaustive list of voter registration and turnout data for electoral democracies, on which we will rely for this study (see Appendix). In order to assure a fair assessment of electoral participation and account for the different types of governments existing in the world’s electoral democracies, we will only consider turnout based upon national legislative elections for the previous ten years. For each election year, the IDEA reports the total number of registered voters and the total number of those registered who voted. For the sake of tabulating voter turnout, we will include invalid votes in our measurements—a voter who casts an invalid vote at least went to vote. Therefore, the electoral participation data used in this

research will constitute the average voter turnout in elections to the lower house of a nation-state's legislative body over the past ten years. In selecting the lower house of a nation's legislative body, we assure a universally applied measure for all the nation-states, since it is a facet of electoral democracy they all share.

In addition to these core variables, we will also observe other variables to ensure that our findings are not influenced by any confounding factors that may otherwise go ignored. The first, socioeconomic development, is measured based upon Gross Domestic Product per capita derived from purchasing power parity (PPP) calculations and converted to international dollars. As with electoral participation, the GDP figures used in this research is an average of yearly GDP totals for the past decade. In so doing, we can accurately gauge each nation-state's economic performance over an extended period of time and avoid the biases of the current global economic recession. This data is collected from the database maintained by the International Monetary Fund (see Appendix).

In addition to socioeconomic development, another variable under examination is level of democratization. This variable is based upon the number of years since a nation-state has most recently been established as a democracy. For example, if a nation-state was democratic, endured a military *coup d'état* and later regained its democracy, we will only count from the second inception of democracy forward. The years from which to calculate this variable is again based upon a database maintained by Freedom House, calculated through 2009.

Finally, the existence of compulsory voting laws will be the third extraneous factor under consideration. A simple review of each constitution in the world's democracy would not be the most accurate measure of this factor. Many nation-states possess merely symbolic compulsory voting requirements that are never enforced. Therefore, in order to receive an accurate indicator,

we will only label a nation-state as having a compulsory voting law if the law is 1) universally enforced and 2) universally applicable in national legislative elections. While some nation-states may have regional compulsory laws, those identified here must be enforced nation-wide. The type of penalty assigned for violating the law is of no consequence to this research, as there is little difference among nation-states—most resort to fines. As with the voter turnout data, the IDEA holds a comprehensive database of nation-states with compulsory voting laws and this database serves as the source for measuring this variable.

Having addressed the definitions and sources for our variables, it is apparent that a statistical design is most appropriate for this study. Since the independent variable of the central relationship being examined is categorical (the electoral system type of the nation-states under observation fall into one of three categories: proportional electoral systems, plurality systems, and mixed systems) and the dependent variable is continuous (level of electoral participation can fall along an infinite range of percentages), the statistical findings that follow employ a comparison of means approach. This statistical method changes when some of the extraneous variables are introduced. For example, compulsory voting laws require cross tabulation for statistical analysis. Given the scope of the study—covering all democratic nation-states with definable electoral systems—a statistical approach that gleans information and data from textual sources such as the IDEA, as mentioned previously, is most beneficial.

Findings & Analysis

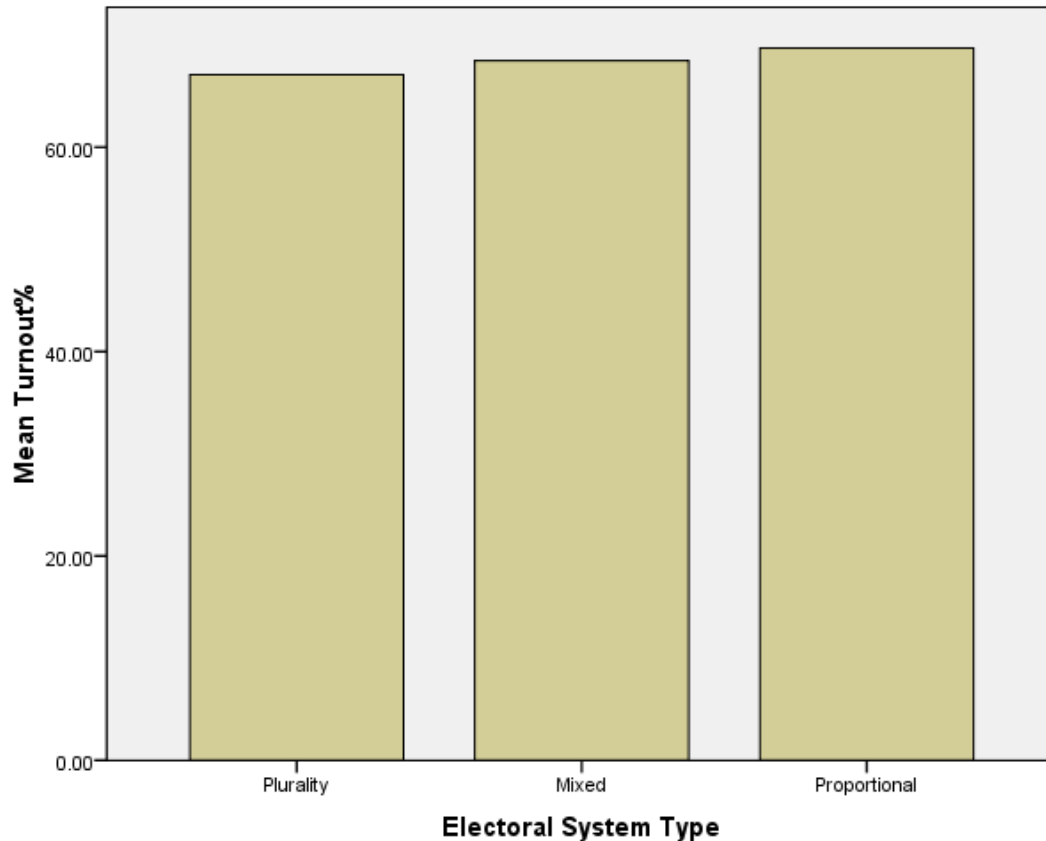
An empirical examination of the fundamental bivariate relationship which serves as the umbrella focus of this research—that is, the effect of electoral system type on electoral participation—yields no convincing evidence that a strong correlation exists between these two

variables. While other confounding factors are addressed further in the research, our focus in this section is the fundamental relationship enumerated in the hypothesis:

Electoral System \longrightarrow Electoral Participation

While the existing literature on this topic posits the conventional wisdom that this relationship not only exists but that the correlation between the two variables is strong, this claim is not supported in the data. Of the 117 electoral democracies examined, 34 possessed plurality electoral systems, 18 had mixed, and 64 had proportional. The mean (average) participation of democracies with plurality based systems was 67.08%, for those with mixed systems it was 68.46%, and for proportional systems, mean turnout was highest at 69.70%. While proportional systems do exhibit on average a relatively higher turnout percentage than plurality systems, Figure 1 illustrates that the difference is too immaterial to qualify as a difference and may be explained by other factors (see below).

Figure 1. Mean voter turnout among each electoral system type



Aside from the sheer numerical and graphical evidence, a statistical calculation of the significance electoral system type has upon voter turnout further confirms the hypothesis incorrect. With electoral system type as the independent variable and electoral participation as the dependent variable, a one-way analysis of variance yields a high significance factor ($F(2, 114) = .450, p = n.s.$). In this statistical test, a relationship between the independent and dependent variable is recorded in a mathematical formula. If the relationship is strong—that is, if one variable is thought to be the cause of another—this significance factor should be .100 or less. Clearly, then, there is no significance between our two variables.

Other Factors Affecting Turnout

While the data suggest electoral system type is not directly linked with electoral participation, this was not the only independent variable introduced in this study. We also examined the potential impact of socioeconomic development, length of time since a country was democratized, and the existence of compulsory voting laws on electoral participation. The analysis of variance yields mixed results and varying levels of significance for these variables, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Measure of influences on electoral participation

Dependent Variable: Electoral Participation

Sources & Independent Variables	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance (where <.100 indicates a relationship)
Corrected Model	3411.631 ^a	8	426.454	2.731	.009
Intercept	56129.801	1	56129.801	359.502	.000
Socioeconomic Dev.	55.059	1	55.059	.353	.554
Years Since Dem.	28.703	1	28.703	.184	.669
ElectoralSys	96.126	2	48.063	.308	.736
Compulsory Voting Laws	1499.168	1	1499.168	9.602	.003
ElectoralSys * CompulsoryVoting	89.073	2	44.537	.285	.752
Error	16237.727	104	156.132		
Total	555790.615	113			
Corrected Total	19649.358	112			

In examining the outcome of the statistical test, the last two columns (labeled “F” and “Significance”) provides the most important information for determining a statistical relationship between the independent variables (highlighted in rows) and electoral participation. Given the relatively high significance factors for both socioeconomic development ($F(1,104) = .353$, $p =$

n.s.) and years since democratization ($F(1,104) = .184, p = \text{n.s.}$), neither of these variables have a statistically significant effect upon electoral participation.

Compulsory voting laws, however, reveal a very strong link with electoral participation such that nation-states with enforced compulsory voting laws exhibit much higher voter turnout than those without such laws. Indeed, the average voter turnout of the nation-states with enforced compulsory voting laws is 82.78%, whereas those without such laws exhibit a mean turnout of 66.84%. At the same time, 11 of the 14 countries with compulsory voting laws have proportional electoral systems, which may explain the slight advantage given proportional electoral systems in comparing the average turnout across electoral systems. In fact, the average turnout among states with both proportional systems and compulsory voting laws is 81.62%, the lowest among countries with compulsory voting laws and one of the other types of electoral systems.

Table 2. Mean turnout comparisons based on existence of compulsory voting laws.

Electoral System	Mean Turnout in Countries with Compulsory Voting Laws (n=14)	Mean Turnout in Countries without Compulsory Voting Laws (n=103)
Plurality	94.78%	66.24%
Mixed	83.11%	66.62%
Proportional	81.62%	67.27%
Total	82.78%	66.84%

Again, the impact of compulsory voting laws is seen quite clearly in Table 2. The differences of average turnout within each group are insignificant. But the differences between the two are substantial.

What Influences Compulsory Voting Laws?

What follows this consideration, then, is the question of whether the type of electoral system impacts whether or not a nation has compulsory voting laws—and, in turn, indirectly impacts participation. While the differences in significance between the two shown in Table 1

would serve to disprove this claim, a more specific statistical test can provide a more convincing answer. In confronting this question, a cross tabulation of electoral system type and compulsory voting laws yields little linkage between the two.

Table 3. Enforced compulsory voting laws & electoral system type cross tabulation.

			Electoral System Type			
			Plurality	Mixed	Proportional	Total
Enforced Compulsory Voting Laws	Yes	Count	1	2	11	14
		% within Electoral System Type	2.9%	11.1%	16.9%	12.0%
	No	Count	33	16	54	103
		% within Electoral System Type	97.1%	88.9%	83.1%	88.0%
	Total	Count	34	18	65	117
		% within Electoral System Type	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

It appears from a cursory view of Table 3 that plurality systems are less inclined to have compulsory voting laws as compared to the other types of systems. This relationship can be confirmed in a Chi-square test (χ^2) of the above cross tabulation. A strong correlation would yield a χ^2 of greater than .05. The relationship in the data above is significant according to this test (χ^2 (2, N = 117) = 4.16, p = .125), suggesting that the presence of compulsory voting laws is related to the type of electoral system. Specifically, the influence is seen in the overwhelming lack of compulsory voting laws in plurality electoral systems. Given the strength of compulsory voting's influence on electoral participation, this finding can explain the slight disadvantage given to plurality systems when comparing mean electoral participation across the three different electoral system types. That is to say, the lower turnout among plurality systems (as compared to

mixed and proportional systems) can be explained by the tendency of plurality systems to lack compulsory voting laws.

Aside from electoral system type, we can examine whether the other extraneous variables we expected to have an impact on electoral system type actually have an impact on compulsory voting laws. Since, as demonstrated in Table 1, these factors had no significant relationship or impact on electoral participation, we can expect that they have little relationship with compulsory voting laws. This is indeed confirmed by the data, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Measure of influences upon incidence of enforced compulsory voting laws.
Dependent Variable: Enforced Compulsory Voting Laws

Sources & Independent Variables	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance (where <.100 indicates a relationship
Corrected Model	.100 ^a	2	.050	.465	.629
Intercept	41.380	1	41.380	385.871	.000
Socioeconomic Dev.	.001	1	.001	.006	.938
Years Since Dem.	.094	1	.094	.881	.350
Error	12.225	114	.107		
Total	103.000	117			
Corrected Total	12.325	116			

As Table 4 indicates, none of the other factors under examination are significantly related to either electoral participation or the presence of compulsory voting laws. The presence of compulsory voting laws cannot be predicted by socioeconomic development or years since democratization. It is plausible, then, to conclude that the link between the presence of compulsory voting laws and the total electoral participation indicates a causal rather than spurious relationship.

Implications and Looking Forward

Our original hypothesis that electoral system type influences electoral participation has been proven false when placed under empirical scrutiny. In its stead is the notion that compulsory voting laws serve as the primary factor impacting electoral participation. This not only defies the original hypothesis, but also the claims made by many scholars in the existing literature. While conventional wisdom in the field may lead us to believe that a proportional representation electoral system *should* lend itself to greater voter participation, this is not a claim founded in empirical evidence. In addition, while many scholars allege a link between socioeconomic development and electoral participation, no such relationship was revealed in this research. In fact, the nation-state with the highest electoral participation of any of the world's democracies—Australia—possesses a plurality based electoral system. But, as the evidence would suggest, its compulsory voting laws drive up its electoral participation numbers. The impact of these obligatory voting laws is a profound statement about democracy, suggesting that the surest way of increasing voter turnout is threatening legal recrimination on those citizens who do not vote.

This notion raises significant philosophical questions that stand outside the scope of this essay. There are, however, arguments to be made on both sides of the debate—arguments worthy of further analysis and study. Namely, many would argue that democracy thrives with maximum participation and involvement from the electorate and, if this maximum can only be achieved through legal mandates, then so be it. How can a government be truly representative when a minority of citizens votes? Others, however, would suggest that legal requirements to vote violate the very standard of freedom democracy and the right to vote entail. How free are elections when citizens are essentially forced to vote? Some fear compulsory voting leads to the

risk of a more uninformed electorate or increases the potential of “random votes”—both of which can delegitimize a government. On the other hand, if a voter is obligated to vote they may be more inclined to become informed and involved. More research, then, is needed to address electoral democracies around the world begin enacting enforced compulsory voting laws to increase rates of electoral participation.

Limited research exists on the topic of compulsory voting laws and the most comprehensive academic article on the subject dates from 1923—a treatise of impassioned defense of the compulsory voting laws (Robson). Others ignore its implications for electoral participation and the political acumen of those citizens compelled to vote. For example, Power and Roberts conduct a case study of Brazil in which they determine compulsory voting merely results in an increase in invalid ballots—arguing that when they are compelled to participate in an election, many voters do not take their responsibility seriously. But this study was limited to a single democracy (1995).

The field could certainly benefit, then, from more research on this important topic—which impacts what essentially serves as the lifeblood of democracy. As noted above, Australia has the highest incidence of voter turnout in the world apparently, based on this study, due to its compulsory voting laws. But Australia also holds its elections on Saturday. The particular day of the week and even time of year during which an election is held could also impact electoral participation, along with the length of time polls are open—such topics would lend themselves to compelling research and analysis. Also, it would be greatly beneficial to examine whether a nation-state could wean itself from compulsory voting laws after several generations and maintain its level of voter turnout. That is, could compulsory voting laws serve as a tool for political socialization such that future generations would be engrained with the importance of

voting? Furthermore, additional research is needed to explore the characteristics of electorates that would necessitate a law compelling them to vote in order to encourage electoral participation. Why are more citizens not taking advantage of their fundamental rights in a democracy? Do nation-states with compulsory voting laws have a more or less informed electorate? Do voters required to vote feel less satisfaction in exercising their right to vote? Is a government more representative of the people when citizens are obliged to vote? These voter-oriented questions seeking to explain and expand upon the empirical data found in the social framework of democracies are worthy of further examination. Voting is intrinsic to democracy. But what does it mean, as this research suggests, that maximum participation can only be obtained when not voting is against the law? It is upon this fundamental question that future research on this topic should be crafted.

The empirical examination upon which we embarked in this research presents a compelling and provocative statistical relationship that dispels traditionally accepted notions about electoral participation and its determinants. Despite the energy and research devoted to this topic, could the solution to maximize electoral participation be as simple as legally requiring citizens to vote—an answer that seems paradoxically elementary and widely complex at the same time? While there is no doubt based upon our research that electoral participation is influenced most significantly by compulsory voting laws, more research is needed to fully understand and appreciate the implications—both practical and theoretical—of this finding.

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Appendix

Freedom House Electoral Democracy Methodology (from FreedomHouse.org)

In addition to providing numerical ratings, the survey assigns the designation “electoral democracy” to countries that have met certain minimum standards. In determining whether a country is an electoral democracy, Freedom House examines several key factors concerning the last major national election or elections.

To qualify as an electoral democracy, a state must have satisfied the following criteria:

1. A competitive, multiparty political system;
2. Universal adult suffrage for all citizens (with exceptions for restrictions that states may legitimately place on citizens as sanctions for criminal offenses);
3. Regularly contested elections conducted in conditions of ballot secrecy, reasonable ballot security, and in the absence of massive voter fraud, and that yield results that are representative of the public will;
4. Significant public access of major political parties to the electorate through the media and through generally open political campaigning.

The numerical benchmark for a country to be listed as an electoral democracy is a subtotal score of 7 or better (out of a total possible 12) for the political rights checklist subcategory A (the three questions on Electoral Process). In the case of presidential/parliamentary systems, both elections must have been free and fair on the basis of the above criteria; in parliamentary systems, the last nationwide elections for the national legislature must have been free and fair. The presence of certain irregularities during the electoral process does not automatically disqualify a country from being designated an electoral democracy. A country cannot be an electoral democracy if significant authority for national decisions resides in the hands of an unelected power, whether a monarch or a foreign international authority. A country is removed from the ranks of electoral democracies if its last national election failed to meet the criteria listed above, or if changes in law significantly eroded the public’s possibility for electoral choice.

Freedom House’s term “electoral democracy” differs from “liberal democracy” in that the latter also implies the presence of a substantial array of civil liberties. In the survey, all Free countries qualify as both electoral and liberal democracies. By contrast, some Partly Free countries qualify as electoral, but not liberal, democracies.

See a complete list of electoral democracies on the following page.

Freedom House 2009 Electoral Democracies

Albania	Honduras	Portugal
Andorra	Hungary	Romania
Antigua and Barbuda	Iceland	St. Kitts and Nevis
Argentina	India	St. Lucia
Australia	Indonesia	St. Vincent and the Grenadines
Austria	Ireland	Samoa
Bahamas	Israel	San Marino
Bangladesh	Italy	Sao Tome and Principe
Barbados	Jamaica	Senegal
Belgium	Japan	Serbia
Belize	Kiribati	Seychelles
Benin	Latvia	Sierra Leone
Bolivia	Lesotho	Slovakia
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Liberia	Slovenia
Botswana	Liechtenstein	South Africa
Brazil	Lithuania	South Korea
Bulgaria	Luxembourg	Spain
Burundi	Macedonia	Sri Lanka
Canada	Madagascar	Suriname
Cape Verde	Malawi	Sweden
Chile	Mali	Switzerland
Colombia	Malta	Taiwan
Comoros	Marshall Islands	Trinidad and Tobago
Costa Rica	Mauritius	Turkey
Croatia	Mexico	Tuvalu
Cyprus	Micronesia	Ukraine
Czech Republic	Moldova	United Kingdom
Denmark	Monaco	United States
Dominica	Mongolia	Uruguay
Dominican Republic	Montenegro	Vanuatu
East Timor	Mozambique	Zambia
Ecuador	Namibia	
El Salvador	Nauru	
Estonia	Netherlands	
Finland	New Zealand	
France	Nicaragua	
Germany	Niger	
Ghana	Norway	
Greece	Palau	
Grenada	Panama	
Guatemala	Papua New Guinea	
Guinea-Bissau	Paraguay	
Guyana	Peru	
Haiti	Poland	

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance Electoral Participation

Methodology (from the organizations website)

The Voter Turnout data presented in this website is based on data gathered from desk research by IDEA staff, surveys to Electoral Management Bodies and the IDEA publications Voter Turnout in Western Europe since 1945 (2004) and Voter Turnout since 1945 (2002). The following sources have been used in gathering voter turnout data: IFES Election Guide, IPU PARLINE Database, African Elections Database, Adam Carr's Election Archive, OSCE, UN Demographic Yearbook, U.S. Census Bureau, CIA World Factbook, information from national Electoral Management Bodies, information from national Statistics Bureaus, Eurostat, & European Parliament.

International Monetary Fund GDP Methodology

The measures for socioeconomic development are derived from gross domestic product based on purchasing-power-parity (PPP) per capita GDP (current international dollar). From the World Economic Outlook Database: "These data form the basis for the country weights used to generate the World Economic Outlook country group composites for the domestic economy. Please note: The IMF is not a primary source for purchasing power parity (PPP) data. WEO weights have been created from primary sources and are used solely for purposes of generating country group composites. For primary source information, please refer to one of the following sources: the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank, or the Penn World Tables. For further information see Box A2 in the April 2004 World Economic Outlook, Box 1.2 in the September 2003 World Economic Outlook for a discussion on the measurement of global growth and Box A.1 in the May 2000 World Economic Outlook for a summary of the revised PPP-based weights, and Annex IV of the May 1993 World Economic Outlook. See also Anne Marie Gulde and Marianne Schulze-Ghattas, "Purchasing Power Parity Based Weights for the World Economic Outlook," in Staff Studies for the World Economic Outlook (Washington: IMF, December 1993), pp. 106-23."

Statistical Analysis of Variance (Significance Measures)

A majority of the bivariate relationships examined in this research essay include a statistical measure of significance derived from a mathematical calculation of analysis of variance (ANOVA). Indicated in the last column of many of the tables provided in this essay, this number reflects, much like an f-score, the statistical relationship present between a dependent variable and a proposed independent variable. More accurate than many t-tests, an ANOVA essentially allows for a comparison of means and, based on this comparison, generates a number indicating the relationship between two variables. This statistical calculation then yields a measure of "significance" indicating how closely two variables are related. If a relationship is present, this measure should be .100 or less. Anything greater indicates a weak or absent relationship.

About the Author

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