



## American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective

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AMERICAN  
VOTER TURNOUT  
IN  
COMPARATIVE  
PERSPECTIVE

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*Despite relatively favorable citizen attitudes, voter turnout in American national elections is far below the average of 80% of the eligible electorate that votes in other industrialized democracies. The American institutional setting—particularly the party system and the registration laws—severely inhibits voter turnout, and probably also accounts for the unusual degree to which education and other socioeconomic resources are directly linked to voting participation in the United States.*

*Using a combination of aggregate and comparative survey data, the present analysis suggests that in comparative perspective, turnout in the United States is advantaged about 5% by political attitudes, but disadvantaged 13% by the party system and institutional factors, and up to 14% by the registration laws. The experience of other democracies suggests that encouraging voter participation would contribute to channeling discontent through the electoral process. Even a significantly expanded American electorate would be more interested and involved in political activity than are present voters in most other democracies.*

Seen in comparative perspective, American voter turnout presents an interesting paradox. Americans seem to be more politically aware and involved than citizens in any other democracy, yet the levels of voter turnout in the United States are consistently far below the democratic average. The resolution of the paradox lies, apparently, in the nature of voting as a form of participation.

In their study of different forms of political participation in seven nations, Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978) suggest a distinction between two types of forces that

shape political activity. On one hand, there are the attitudes and characteristics that individuals bring to the participatory arena. Participation is, in general, facilitated by greater socioeconomic resources and by general levels of political awareness and self-confidence. On the other hand, participation is also facilitated or hindered by the institutional context within which individuals act. Legal rules, social and political structures, and configurations of partisanship all present the individual with conditions that shape his or her choices, and are relatively difficult for the individual to change. Analysis of

the different types of participation suggests that voting is particularly likely to be dominated by institutional factors.

The present analysis attempts to explain the paradox of American voter participation in terms of the conjunction of the two types of forces cited above. Americans do possess political attitudes that encourage their voting activity. If citizens in other democracies possessed the American configuration of attitudes, their voter participation would on average increase. However, the American attitudinal advantage is only a marginal enhancer of voting. Its effects are limited, first, because in recent years the American attitudinal advantage has declined, and, more importantly, because voting is so powerfully shaped by institutional context. In comparative perspective, the American registration rules, electoral system, and party system inhibit voter participation, outweighing by far the attitudinal advantage.

The subsequent discussion is divided into three sections. The first of these presents aggregate evidence on American advantages in social and attitudinal resources compared with other modern democracies, and contrasts these with the putatively disadvantageous institutional conditions. The second section uses econometric analyses of survey and aggregate data to estimate the relative importance of specific individual and system characteristics that affect voter participation. The third section analyzes the contributions made by each type of factor to relative American voter turnout by combining the estimates of the impact of various individual and institutional attributes with the evidence on the relative American advantages and disadvantages.

### **The Cultural and Institutional Environment for Voting**

Table 1 presents some evidence that allows us to characterize the American

political cultural environment in comparative perspective. The table is divided into several sections. The first compares the democratic publics on some attitudes often demonstrated to be associated with political participation. The second section compares the citizens' reports of three forms of political activity that might be expected to be related to their likelihood of voting. The third section compares the electorates on some demographic characteristics expected to be related to voter turnout.

Although attitudes facilitating participation declined in the United States in the late 1960s (Abramson and Aldrich, 1982; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, 1976), comparison with political attitudes in the European nations still shows the American public to good advantage. Partisanship has declined, but is still equal to or above average. Eighty-three percent of Americans named a party they usually felt close to, placing the United States behind only the Netherlands and Finland in a twelve-nation comparison. On the other side of the partisanship scale, 14% said they felt very close to their party, a figure slightly behind only two other countries (Austria and Italy), although a drop from the America of the early 1960s.

Despite the drop in political confidence, the United States still led all countries in the number of citizens believing that they had some say in government. In general political interest, the 90% of Americans who reported at least some interest were comparable to their counterparts a decade earlier, and well ahead of the cross-national average. Only in the decline of political trust did the Americans drop from a leading position to one well back. The United States ranked ahead of only Italy in trust of the national government in 1974. (While most of the other attitude levels stabilized in the mid-1970s, and did not decline further, trust actually dropped an additional 8% between 1974 and 1980.) But political trust, although related to voter participation in America, was the

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**Table 1. The Cultural Environment for Voter Participation:  
America Compared to Other Industrial Democracies in the 1970s**

Variables		United States %	Averages from Other Industrial Democracies		Rank of the United States
			11 Nations %	7 Nations %	
<i>Attitudes Facilitating Voter Turnout</i>					
Partisanship:	mention a party they usually feel close to	83	73	77	3/12
Efficacy:	reject: "People like me have no say in what the government does."	59	—	33	1/8
Trust:	trust the national government to do what is right most or all of the time.	34	—	47	7/8
Interest:	possess at least some interest in politics.	91	—	75	1/8
<i>Other Forms of Political Activity</i>					
Discussion:	discussed politics with others	89	68	74	1/12
Persuasion:	tried to convince others during elections.	40	—	27	2/8
Party Work:	worked for a party or candidate during an election.	30	—	14	1/8
<i>Demographic Characteristics Facilitating Participation</i>					
Education:	beyond lower (ninth grade) education.	79	—	39	1/8
Occupation:	white collar jobs in work force.	64	49	48	1/12
Age:	over age 34 among population of voting age.	64	66	66	11/12

Sources: See acknowledgement in Notes section for surveys. Occupation from Taylor and Jodice, 1983. Age from United Nations, 1979-1983. Other Democracies (Austria, Britain, Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, Denmark, France, and Ireland): Political Action Study (Barnes et al., 1979) and Euro-Barometer (Rabier and Inglehart, 1981).

least important of the four attitude variables in the American attitude studies.<sup>1</sup> We must conclude, therefore, that despite the decline in the period from 1960-1975, American political attitudes should still facilitate more political participation than political attitudes in other democracies.

This conclusion is strongly supported by the second section of the table, which compares three other measures of political activity: (1) discussing politics with other people, (2) trying to convince others to

vote for a party or candidate during an election campaign, and (3) working for a party or candidate during elections. Nearly 90% of the American public reports discussing politics at least some of the time, compared to an average of only 68% across the 11 European nations. (Comparisons at the most active end of the discussion measure yield similar comparative results.) Thirty percent of the American citizens report having worked during a campaign at some time, more

than double the average for seven European nations in which this question was asked. In reporting having tried to convince others during election campaigns, the Americans trail only the West Germans, with 40% affirming such activity, in comparison to an average of 27% in seven other countries. These American results parallel other studies of the American electorate quite closely. The strong relative position of the American public in attitudes that facilitate participation and in various measures of political activity other than voting also appears in other comparative studies, particularly in the five-nation Civic Culture study (Almond and Verba, 1963), and in the seven-nation Participation and Equality study (Verba et al., 1978).

The last section of Table 1 compares the American and European mass publics on three important demographic characteristics that have been shown to be related to political participation propensities. The American participation studies, as well as the comparative studies, have demonstrated that possession of greater social and economic resources, particularly higher levels of education, is associated with attitudes and behavior that facilitate participation. While these comparisons must not be taken completely literally, given differences in occupational structure and in educational quality and content, they help explain the relatively high levels of political awareness and involvement in the United States. The average educational level is much higher in the United States than in most of Western Europe (reflecting the much older American concern for mass education, as opposed to the European elite emphasis). The American citizen is also more likely to hold a white-collar or professional job than his European counterpart, although here the differences are not quite so marked, as all these nations are relatively economically developed.

Only in its age structure do the demographics of the American public tell

against political participation. Many studies have shown that the youngest segment of the electorate, in general those under age 35, tends to participate less in most forms of political activity.<sup>2</sup> At the time of the 1970 census, the proportion of young voters in the American electorate was above average, although the differences were not very great. The gap increased notably by the 1980 censuses, due in part to reluctance in a few European nations to lower the voting age to 18, but primarily to the "bulge" of young people entering the American electorate in the late 1960s and the 1970s. This demographic change, as we shall discuss later, did increase the gap in turnout between the United States and the other democracies. As late as 1970, however, the age gap was slight.

The picture of American political attitudes and demographic characteristics that emerges from Table 1 leads us to expect high levels of American voter participation. However, the institutional factors facing the American voters are for the most part highly inhibiting, compared with those in the other industrial nations. The following discussion summarizes these differences from the American point of view. The full distribution for the 20 contemporary democracies is presented in Appendix 1.

As has been emphasized in previous comparative studies of voter participation (Crewe, 1981; Glass, Squire, and Wolfinger, 1984; Powell, 1980), the legal situation is of great importance. In some nations, legal sanctions are used to encourage voters to go to the polls. While the nature of the penalties and the level of enforcement varies within and across countries, there is no doubt that such sanctions tend to increase voter turnout. Such mandated voter participation has not been used in the United States, but is present in Australia, Belgium, Greece, and Italy, as well as in parts of Austria and Switzerland.

Moreover, the registration laws make

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voting more difficult in the United States than in almost any other democracy. In 16 of the democracies examined, initiative for registering eligible voters is taken by the government in some fashion. In Australia and New Zealand the citizens must take the initiative; however, they are legally required to do so, and subject to fines or other penalties for failing to register. Of the 20 democracies outside the United States, only France leaves voter registration to voluntary initiative of citizens (Herman, 1976). In France citizens are required to register in their community and to obtain identification cards, which facilitates voter registration. In the United States registration is entirely the responsibility of the citizens and no set of requirements brings them to the registration site. Moreover, although the residency requirement in the United States has now been limited to 30 days before a federal election, only a handful of states with small populations have day-of-voting registration. Other states vary greatly in their registration hours and places, and in the degree to which these facilitate registration (see Rosenstone and Wolfinger, 1978), but all require the voter to re-register if he or she has changed residence since the last election. As the 1980 census showed that 47% of the population had moved in the past five years, it would seem that about half the eligible citizens must, in effect, make a double effort to vote in a presidential election: first the effort to register, then to vote.

A feature of the institutional context that has been the subject of much debate and analysis among American political scientists, but whose comparative implications are harder to measure and assess, is the competitive context. Intuitively, it would seem that in elections in which the outcome was expected to be close, citizens would feel more reason to participate and, perhaps more importantly, party organizations and activists would feel

more incentive to get their voters to the polls.

In Appendix 1, and in the statistical analysis in the next section, two possible aspects of such competition are examined. First, we consider the frequency with which control of the national chief executive, by a party or coalition of parties, changed after an election in the twenty-year period from 1961 through 1980. By this measure, there is no doubt that the environment of the American presidential election was among the most competitive in any democracy. In the United States, party control of the presidency changed hands following four of the six elections between 1960 and 1980. We must note, however, that there were few changes in party control of the national legislature in the United States in this period, with the Democrats maintaining control of the House and losing control of the Senate only in 1980.

The second aspect of competitiveness concerns the possible influence of the electoral constituencies on competition in different parts of a country. The idea is simply that the electoral constituencies help determine whether parties and voters have equal incentive to get voters to the polls in all parts of the country, or whether there may be reason to neglect less evenly balanced regions in turning out the vote. Where the chief executive is chosen by simple majority or plurality vote, all regions should be equally important (e.g., France). In countries where the chief executive is chosen by the legislature, as in the various parliamentary systems, the question becomes the nature of the constituencies electing the legislators. With proportional representation from the nation as a whole or from large districts, parties have an incentive to mobilize everywhere. With single-member districts, some areas may be written off as hopeless.

Various American studies have found such effects in races for state legislative

seats and governor (Caldeira and Patterson, 1982; Patterson and Caldeira, 1983; and references cited therein). Studies in Britain and Canada (Denver and Hands, 1975; Irvine, 1976) also suggest effects that dampen participation in some districts. In this intranational consideration of competitiveness, we would expect the American situation to be most like those in the single-member district countries, as the state acts as the electoral unit in the electoral college, and its electoral votes are delivered as a block, rather than proportionally. We must note, however, that American states shift support in quite volatile fashion. In 1972 about two-thirds of the states went for a candidate by a margin of over 20%, but in 1976 only 4% did so, while in 1980 20% did so.

Another important aspect of the partisan context is the linkage between political parties and social groups. For a variety of reasons, we expect voter turnout to be higher in countries having sharper partisan-group differentials in support. Partisan choice should seem simpler to the less involved; cues from the personal environment of the individual (friends, family, and co-workers) should be more consistent; party organizers can more easily identify their potential supporters in making appeals and in helping voters to the polls on election day. The last column in Appendix 1 shows a measure of the differential ties between voters' membership in social groups and their partisanship. In some countries, as in Sweden or the Netherlands, to know a voter's occupation or religion enables us to predict his or her voting preference to a very great degree. In Sweden in 1964, for example, about 84% of those with manual labor occupations supported the Social Democrats or the Communists, while only about 32% of the voters with white-collar or farm occupations did so, yielding a "class voting" index of 52. In the United States in the same year the manual labor support for the Democrats exceeded

white-collar support by only about 17%. Indices of partisan support based on occupation, religion, and church attendance were calculated from surveys in 20 countries. Appendix 1 shows the highest of these indices.<sup>3</sup>

As shown in Appendix 1, the party-group support differentials in the United States were only about half as great as those in the average democracy. In fact, the United States had one of the lowest levels of party-group support of any modern democracy. As the bases of the old Roosevelt coalition continued to crumble during the last 20 years, the vote scores on party-group differences fell even faster than these numbers, based on party identification, would indicate (see Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, 1983).<sup>4</sup>

While the party-group linkage measure seems to tap an important feature of the party system for voting mobilization, it would be desirable to have explicit measures of the strength of comparative party organizations. We would expect dense, penetrative, nationally-oriented party organizations to be most effective in getting voters to the polls in national elections. Unfortunately, there seem to be no reliable quantitative studies of party organization strength across nations. The only comparative study that even attempts to describe party organization in these terms is Janda's work (1980), which relies on expert coding estimates for 12 of the nations being considered here. The time period was the early 1960s.

The Janda study results are suggestive, and can be summarized here briefly. They portray the American party system as slightly above average in the sheer magnitude and extensiveness of party organization, but highly decentralized and with very weak ties to other social organizations. The results regarding extensiveness are interesting, but most of the major parties scored close to the maximum on the measures reported. There was not much variation across nations on the variable;

the slight American advantage resulted from weak scores by some of the smaller parties in multiparty systems. I have not been able to discover comparative survey results on voters' reports of contacts by parties or other measures of comparative party effort.

The measures of centralization and organizational ties between parties and social organizations, called "penetration" in the Janda study, differentiate the democracies more sharply. The American parties are highly decentralized, especially in the selection of legislative candidates. On a combined measure of organizational structure, funding, and candidate selection, the United States ranks lowest of the 12 modern democracies in the degree of centralization. On the "penetration" measure, examining the ties between parties and such organizations as trade unions, religious bodies, and ethnic groups, the American parties ranked ahead of only the Irish parties. This measure seems to be the organizational counterpart of the party-group linkage measure based on partisan behavior, and empirically is closely related to it. We would expect that the lesser capacity of American parties to make use of other social organizations to spread their messages and to get voters to the polls would hinder their mobilization efforts.

We can summarize the description of the institutional environment for voting in the United States in comparison with other democracies by saying that it is the inverse of our description of the cultural environment. With few exceptions (age structure and political trust), the evidence on American political culture suggests that it should facilitate all kinds of individual political activity. With one exception (experience of party changes in national control of the executive), the institutional factors would seem to make the act of voting more difficult, and to impede the ability of parties and activists to mobilize supporters through appeals or

through election day efforts to get them to the voting booth.

### **Estimating the Impact of Individual and Institutional Variables on Voter Turnout**

While the evidence in Section I suggests reasons for America's exceptional pattern of an involved, but nonvoting citizenry, we need much more precise estimates of the relative importance of factors at the individual and system levels believed to affect voting. As it is likely that variables at both the individual and system levels are significant, the ideal analysis would consider both types of factors simultaneously. Unfortunately, we do not have comparable attitude surveys for half of the industrialized democracies. For the moment, therefore, we shall develop separate models of voter turnout. One of these models will be based on aggregate analysis of system-level variables, using the full set of 20 industrialized democracies. The second will be based on individual surveys from nine nations. In conclusion we shall consider on a preliminary basis the interaction of levels.

### **Comparisons of American Voter Turnout**

The first step is to measure American voter turnout in comparative perspective. The problem is fraught with technical difficulties, but the overall situation is quite clear. In comparison with other democracies, the United States has relatively low participation of its citizens in major national elections. Average turnout in presidential elections in the United States as a percentage of the voting-age population was 54% in the period from 1972 to 1980. In the other 20 industrialized democracies the average turnout was 80%. American national voter participation exceeds only that of Switzerland. Among the nations that did not have



compulsory voting, average voter turnout was 77% of the population of voting age, nearly 50% higher than turnout in the United States. This comparison is probably the most valid and reliable of those available. Detailed data are shown in Appendix 1. Similar comparisons may be found in Crewe (1981), Glass et al. (1984), and Powell (1980).

These comparisons rely on official reports of votes in the election that determines most directly the control of the chief executive. In the United States and France, these are presidential elections; in the other industrialized democracies, the most comparable elections are for the national legislature. The major problem in comparison is the denominator of the voting ratio: the eligible population. As turnout tends to be quite stable from election to election, the use of averages does not conceal many changes, but does help even out small errors in the census survey-based estimates of the voting age population at the time of the election. Appendix 3 discusses problems for comparison created by resident aliens in the population.

An important point to recognize about American voter turnout in comparative perspective is its close relation to voter registration. The United States is unique in the low registration rate of its population of voting age. Comparisons of turnout as percentages of either voting-age or registered populations lead to similar numbers in most countries, but radically different ones in the United States. In the United States perhaps two-thirds of eligible citizens are registered; of the other democracies, only in Switzerland are less than 90% of the citizens of voting age registered.

A final comparative point considers the time perspective. In most countries voter turnout changed little from the 1960s to the 1970s, remaining rather stable from election to election. In the United States, however, turnout dropped notably, for

reasons various scholars have discussed elsewhere. These changes only served to widen the gap in electoral participation between the United States and the other democracies. They did not create the gap, nor, in fact, did the decline in American turnout even change its rank against any other country.

### Aggregate-Level Explanations of Voter Turnout

I have collected data on most of the contextual and institutional factors described in the previous sections for the modern democracies. We can use these to attempt to explain differences in turnout across the democracies. As the institutional conditions do not change very often, it seems more appropriate to compare country averages than to enter individual elections as separate cases. Table 2, then, presents the model for voter turnout as a percentage of the population of voting age. Theoretically, we would expect that in the presence of compulsory voting, other factors encouraging participation have less effect. The countries where voting is compulsory are therefore deleted in the models in Table 2. (If we include them and a dummy variable for compulsory voting, the latter is powerful and significant, while the other aggregate coefficients are slightly depressed.)

The figures for the 1960s and 1970s are shown separately, as we hope to have more confidence in the results that are consistent at the two time periods. With a few minor exceptions, the independent variables are also measured separately at the two time points. Spain is not included in the first decade, as it did not become a democracy until the late 1970s. (Absence of party-group linkage data for Switzerland before 1972 and Israel in the 1970s forces us to use the same figure for both decades.) Switzerland is included as a dummy variable because of the unique

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**Table 2. Aggregate-Level Explanations of Voter Turnout:  
Predicting Average Turnout as Percent of the Population of Voting Age  
in Democracies Without Compulsory Voting**

Predictor Variable	Regression Coefficient	Standard Error	Standardized Beta
<i>Voter Turnout in the 1960s: 1960-1970</i>			
Age: Percent over age 34	.01	.32	.00
Automatic Registration	3.70	2.51	.23 <sup>a</sup>
Frequent Changes in Executive	.43	1.58	.03
Nationally Competitive Election Districts	1.89	1.45	.22 <sup>a</sup>
Party-Group Linkage Index	.38	.15	.41 <sup>a</sup>
United States Dummy	- 1.71	7.74	-.04
Switzerland Dummy	-30.11	5.61	-.75 <sup>a</sup>
N=15 R <sup>2</sup> = .90			
<i>Voter Turnout in the 1970s: 1971-1980</i>			
Age: Percent over age 34	.38	.28	.13 <sup>a</sup>
Automatic Registration	.33	1.97	.02
Frequent Changes in Executive	1.26	1.23	.11
Nationally Competitive Election Districts	1.78	1.09	.18 <sup>a</sup>
Party-Group Linkage Index	.45	.18	.33 <sup>a</sup>
United States Dummy	-12.30	6.46	-.25 <sup>a</sup>
Switzerland Dummy	-38.50	4.89	-.79 <sup>a</sup>
N=17 R <sup>2</sup> = .94			

Sources: Sources and data coding shown in Appendix 1.

<sup>a</sup>Significant at the .05 level.

nature of its collective executive and other special features of Swiss democracy.<sup>5</sup> A dummy variable is also included for the U.S., with its special registration conditions.

If we consider the general aggregate models emerging from Table 2, we see that they are reasonably stable and consistent across the time periods. (With few exceptions, they are also consistent with the analysis of voter turnout in 29 democracies reported in Powell, 1980, 1982.) The coefficients for intranationally competitive electoral laws and party-group linkages are rather similar in both time periods; party-group linkages are particularly strong and significant. The impact of changes in the chief executive is both weaker and less consistent. The unstandardized age coefficients are larger in the second decade, presumably reflecting the lowering of the voting age in most of the

democracies in the 1970s, increasing the weight of an under-34 component. The dummy for Switzerland reflects the significantly lower turnout in the Swiss system in both decades, although the gap has increased over time. The presence of automatic registration facilitates turnout; its effects are stronger if we delete the U.S. dummy. (The increasingly negative U.S. dummy is discussed below.)

The implications of these data are that voter turnout in the United States is severely inhibited by its institutional context. The only feature of the institutional context where the United States seemed to enjoy a clear-cut advantage was in the frequent changes in chief executive—a variable that was insignificant in each decade in the aggregate analysis. (Considering the Swiss case as unique, rather than occupying the end of a continuum, in this regard.) The U.S. was disadvan-

taged by voluntary registration, unevenly competitive electoral districts, and very weak linkages (perceptual and organizational) between parties and social groups. The distance of 23 points between American party-group linkages and those in the average democracy would alone have been predicted to depress turnout by about 10%, based on the average coefficient in Table 2.

These models also work very similarly if we use turnout as a percent of the registered electorate as the dependent variable. The major difference is a reversal in sign of the automatic registration variable. That is, the presence of automatic registration facilitates voting participation of the age-eligible population, but leads to lower turnout among the registered. Such effects probably reflect the differing degrees of interest and partisanship required to enter the pool of the registered in the two kinds of registration situations. It is consistent with the well-known fact that turnout of registered voters is actually very high in the United States.

One variable not shown in the table is worthy of comment. While comparable education statistics were not available, I did attempt to use a measure of the percent of the labor force in white-collar occupations to get at the greater socioeconomic resources and skills available in some populations. The white-collar variable was positively related to aggregate levels of political discussion, in the 14 nations for which I had such a measure, at a significant and positive level ( $r = .53$ ), just as we would predict from participation theory and from the individual models examined in the next section. However, the percent white-collar was negatively related to voter turnout ( $r = -.18$ ), and when entered into the multiple regression with the institutional variables tended to be reduced toward zero. Accordingly, the white-collar variable is deleted in Table 2; its effects in

mobilizing awareness are not sufficient to make an impact on turnout in the aggregate data analysis.

The analysis in Table 2 makes it possible to estimate the effects of the institutional variables in shaping voter turnout in modern democracies. I would emphasize, however, that we must be careful in the substantive interpretation of the institutional variables. The variables for intranational constituencies that enhance competition, and those for party-group linkage are the major source of concern. They are getting at some institutional property of the systems that affect turnout, to be sure. But these two variables are themselves related, and, in the subset of 12 countries for which we have the rather doubtful data, both are related to party organizational structure—especially party penetration of social groups. The party organization variables are not entered in the models, because of the limited number of cases and dubious nature of the data. If we do analyze those 12 countries, we find that centralization and penetration of social groups are strongly associated with turnout and with party-group linkage. Extensiveness, which has little variance, is not related to turnout. In multiple regression analysis, however, party-group linkage tends to reduce the impact of centralization and penetration to insignificance. Given the measurement problems, it is unwise to be confident about which of these aspects of the party and electoral system are the ones shaping turnout.

#### Individual-Level Explanations of Voter Turnout

Our analysis of voter turnout at the individual level relies on comparative survey studies. We would like to know two things. First, are the processes of voter involvement in the United States similar to those in other countries despite the differences in context? Second, if not,

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are there reasonably similar processes operating in other democracies, so that we could estimate the relative importance of various individual-level variables if the United States did have electoral and party contexts more comparable to those in other countries?

One difficulty should be noted first. We know that American survey studies consistently report greater levels of participation than do aggregate statistics. The difference reflects in part the population reached by the completed survey, and in part a tendency of citizens to overreport their participation. Judging by analysis of the voter validation studies conducted by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center (SRC) in 1964, 1976, and 1980, the overstatement of participation of some 18% in the 1970s reflects about an 11% net overreporting by citizens, and a problem of about 7% in the survey reaching parts of the population of voting age (Clausen, 1968-69; Katosh and Traugott, 1981). Citizen surveys in most other modern democracies do not show as large an overstatement as do the American studies. However, the percentage of non-voters who report voting in other countries seems not dissimilar to that in the United States—about one-fourth to one-third the nonvoters in the sample. (This statement is an informed guess, based on comparison of official and reported turnout across 14 surveys; the proportions due to sampling and response errors cannot be estimated accurately.) It is reassuring for our purposes that the relative rank of the United States among the nations which we shall be comparing here is the same using either survey or official statistics, with the United States ahead of Switzerland, but behind the other nations.

Table 3 uses standard demographic variables plus party identification (ID) to predict political discussion and voting in the most recent national election from surveys in nine nations, including the United States. The left side of the table

shows the model for voter turnout; the right side shows a model for political discussion. On the far left side of the table we see categories of increasing education and age, as well as entries for sex and party identification. The cell entries show the increased probability of voting as we move, for example, from one education group to the next, in comparison with the base-line group. In the United States there is on average no increased probability of voting as we move from sixth grade to ninth grade education, but an increase of 10% as we move from ninth grade to the eleventh grade, and another 17% for actually completing high school. Turnout among the college educated is 35% greater than among those with a primary education only. We can compare these sharp education effects with the average effects in the other eight nations: a consistent, but small, increase of 2-3% as we move up the comparable categories, with turnout among the college educated only 10% higher than among those with a primary education. The American voter participation process is obviously far more affected by education levels than the process in other nations.

Table 3, and Table 4 below, show the unstandardized regression coefficients (multiplied by 100) from the ordinary least squares regression equations that predict voting using demographic and attitudinal variables. The dummy variables for each group category allow us to make direct comparisons with the base-line category and observe possible curvilinear effects, while controlling for other variables in the equations. Because voting is dichotomous, however, there is a potential problem of misestimating the magnitude of the coefficients by using multiple regression. The use of LOGIT or PROBIT provides reliable estimates with such dichotomous dependent variables. All the equations in the individual level analysis have been reestimated using LOGIT and PROBIT. In fact, as usually

**Table 3. Individual-Level Explanations of Voter Turnout:  
Predicting the Increase in Probability of Voting  
and Talking Politics in Nine Nations**

Independent Variables	Predicted Increment in Activity Relative to Base-line Group in the Category <sup>a</sup>			
	Percent Who Voted in Last National Election		Percent Who Discussed Politics	
	United States	Eight-Nation Average	United States	Eight-Nation Average
<i>Education Level<sup>b</sup></i>				
Basic	—	—	—	—
Lower	( 0)	2	10	11
Extended Lower	10	4	16	17
Middle	27	7	24	25
Post-Secondary	35	10	29	28
<i>Sex</i>				
Male	—	—	—	—
Female	- 6	- 1	- 5	-12
<i>Age</i>				
20-25	—	—	—	—
26-29	9	21	( 5)	( 1)
30-39	21	25	( 5)	( 0)
40-49	25	30	( 3)	(- 1)
50-59	32	(30)	( 5)	(- 2)
60+	40	(30)	(- 2)	- 8
<i>Party Identification</i>				
No	—	—	—	—
Yes	18	17	13	13

<sup>a</sup>These numbers are 100 × the unstandardized regression coefficients in regression equations with dummy variables for each group except the base-line group in each category. Coefficients in parentheses are not significant at the .05 level. As demonstrated in Appendix 2, LOGIT and PROBIT models provide nearly identical estimates. The eight nations are Britain, West Germany, Netherlands, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Finland, and Canada. (Coefficients are averaged, not taken from a single pooled data equation.) For Canada the analysis uses federal party identification in 1974 and the same education categories that were used in the United States.

<sup>b</sup>The education variable is based on codes constructed for each country that attempt to identify comparable levels across countries. See Barnes et al. (1979), pp. 584-588. In the U.S. the levels correspond to the following categories: Under 7 grades completed, 7-9 grades, 10-11 grades, Completed High School, and Post High School.

seems to be the case, the solutions are virtually identical for those with ordinary multiple regression. Appendix 2 demonstrates the extremely similar predictions from the three models. As multiple regression provides more readily interpreted coefficients, it is used in Tables 3 and 4. The results of this analysis emphasize the robustness of regression results when

dealing with dichotomous dependent variables, and suggest that the concern frequently expressed by readers on this score is seldom justified.

For readers accustomed to standardized regression coefficients, I can report that comparing, for example, average regression coefficients for a Socioeconomic Resource Level (SERL) variable of educa-

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tion and income, as used by Verba et al. (1978), in the equations yields a standardized beta coefficient of .33 between SERL and vote in the U.S., and only .05 between SERL and vote in 10 other nations.

The greater power of education effects in the United States might lead us to suspect that the education variable was being measured inadequately or differently in different countries. While we cannot disprove this possibility, some persuasive evidence that it is not so is offered in the two right-hand columns of Table 3. Here, the model is applied to a dichotomous measure of political discussion. The discussion results are striking for the great similarity between the impact of education in the United States and the other democracies, and are a tribute to the comparability of the Barnes and Kaase (1979) coding of education level. Not only does the probability of discussing politics rise with each increment of education, but the effects are extremely similar across countries.<sup>6</sup> This comparison seems powerful evidence that the voting participation process, but not the general process of personal involvement, is quite different in the United States.

Not only education, but age, shows a different relationship to voter turnout in the United States and the other countries. In the United States, each age increment shows increased probability of voting. In the other nations, the effects are very great going from the first to the second age group, but quite weak thereafter. On the other hand, the effect of party identification on voter turnout, and on discussion, is about the same in the United States as in the European average. Women voted somewhat less often than men in the United States, while the average difference was very small in other countries. Political discussion showed a sex gap in all countries, but the American difference was much less than that in the other democracies.<sup>7</sup>

The comparison of averages in Table 3 does, of course, blur differences among the non-American nations. Moreover, we need clearer evidence on the attitudinal processes involved in getting voters to the polls. In Table 4 we see individual participation models for the eight nations in the 1973-1976 Political Action study plus Canada in 1974, and including measures of interest and efficacy variables used in many American studies. For the sake of simplicity, political trust is not included here; its effects are quite weak, although in the predicted direction in most countries. The top of the table shows, again, the increased amount of voting participation expected from each increment of education, controlling for interest and efficacy as well for sex, age, and party identification. Toward the bottom of the table we see the predictions for interest and efficacy. Each of the nine nations is presented separately, as we are not controlling for system-level effects. (The efficacy variable is a two-question variable, including the "no say" item shown in Table 1, exactly as used in Abramson and Aldrich, 1982.)

The data in Table 4 are complex, but rich in information. The first point to note is that the individual voter participation processes in Austria and, especially, Italy (shown at the far right of the table) are rather different from those in the other countries. The attitudinal variables, particularly interest, but also efficacy, education, and even party identification, have much less effect in these two countries. And age is notable for the very great increase between the 21-24 group and the next older one, with very little subsequent change. It seems likely that voter participation in Austria and Italy is dominated primarily by institutional effects. Both countries have substantial compulsory voting, and Austria has an extremely well-organized and penetrative party system, so these patterns are not too surprising. Moreover, the extremely high

**Table 4. Individual-Level Explanations of Voter Turnout:  
Predicting the Increase in Probability of Voting from  
Demographic and Attitudinal Variables in Nine Nations**

Independent Variables	Predicted Increment in Voter Turnout Relative to Base-line Group (%) <sup>b</sup>								
	USA	BRIT	WGER	NETH	SWITZ	FIN	CAN	AUST	ITALY
<i>Education Level</i> <sup>a</sup>									
Basic	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lower	- 5	- 3	0	- 1	10*	- 3	1	1	0
Extended Lower	2	- 2	2	2	7*	0	5	1	3
Middle	15*	1	4	7	9*	5	9*	- 0	0
Post-Secondary	21*	6	3	7	15*	4	5	2	- 4
<i>Sex</i>									
Male	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Female	- 3	1	- 0	8*	- 4	0	- 0	1	0
<i>Age</i>									
20-25	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
26-29	10*	12*	14*	13*	9*	25*	3	40*	48*
30-39	19*	26*	16*	9*	16*	32*	6	39*	51*
40-49	23*	36*	15*	15*	23*	31*	15*	40*	51*
50-59	29*	34*	16*	19*	25*	35*	10*	40*	52*
60+	37*	33*	15*	21*	20*	35*	15*	40*	52*
<i>Party Identification</i>									
No	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Yes	13*	24*	8*	33*	21*	9*	4*	4*	3*
<i>Political Interest</i>									
Not at All	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Not Much	17*	9*	5*	8*	19*	9*	24*	2	2
Somewhat	30*	15*	7*	12*	34*	15*	34*	1	4*
Very	32*	18*	8*	8*	33*	14*	36*	2	- 0
<i>Political Efficacy</i>									
Low	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Mixed	6*	3	2	2	8*	1	- 1	1	- 3*
High	9*	6*	1	7*	6	- 0	- 0	1	- 4*
Reported Turnout (%)	74	79	94	85	59	90	82	96	95

<sup>a</sup>See Note to Table 3 for education levels.

<sup>b</sup>See Note to Table 3 for source of estimate.

\* indicates that turnout of group was significantly above base-line group (.05). N of cases from 1030 to 2149.

reported turnout levels of 95% leave limited room for attitudinal effects to have play.

The second point to note about Table 4 is that the six "middle" countries, with automatic registration but without compulsory voting, manifest voter process models that seem rather similar. Naturally, we do find substantial variation—as

we would expect from the measurement and language differences, the rather small subgroups in some categories, and the very high reported turnout levels (over 90% in Germany and Finland). But in each country we see sharp, slightly curvilinear effects of political interest and, less consistently, efficacy. Party identification, although varying in magnitude, is a

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significant direct predictor of turnout in each country.<sup>8</sup> Age has a generally positive and curvilinear effect, although the timing of drop-off varies. Sex is an insignificant predictor of turnout in all countries except the Netherlands, after interest and party identification are taken into account. Finally, we see that after political interest and efficacy have been included in the model, education has very weak and often insignificant effects on turnout. In most countries a somewhat weak initial effect of education (summarized in Table 3) is further reduced by taking account of political interest. Scattered and collectively significant small effects do remain, particularly at the middle and higher education levels.

Considering the American model in comparison with the other six nations without compulsory voting suggests both commonality and difference. On the one hand, attitudinal effects are rather similar. Party identification has an effect which falls about at the average of the other democracies. Interest is similar in strength, if on the higher side, and similar in its curvilinearity (not much impact by the increase from "somewhat" to "very" interested). Efficacy has an effect in the United States that is somewhat above the democratic average. Sex is insignificant in its effect on turnout after attitudinal variables are taken into account.

On the other hand, the direct effects of age and, especially, education are much greater in the United States than in any of the other countries. The age variable is notable for its continuing impact as we move to increasingly older groups. The impact is about average as citizens age from 20 to 39, but continues in the U.S., while becoming weaker in the higher age categories elsewhere. It seems likely that the lesser mobility of the older age groups, in conjunction with the unique American registration system, plays a major role in accounting for this continuing impact of age in the United States

(Squire, Glass and Wolfinger, 1984; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, ch. 3). Unfortunately, a variable for length of residence is not included in the eight-nation study.

Most distinctive of all is the direct impact of education on American voter turnout. While the effect of education shown in Table 3 is reduced somewhat with interest and efficacy in the model, the direct effects are still quite powerful, with high school graduation worth 13% and college work another 6%. Not only does the United States have the most educated citizenry, but education has much more direct impact on voter turnout.<sup>9</sup> It seems very likely, although we cannot demonstrate it directly, that the difficulty of registration in America is also responsible for this remarkable distinctiveness of American voting processes. The great weakness of the party system in its organization and linkage to social groups may also enhance the value of personal characteristics and resources.

Of course, the overwhelming point to make about the models shown in Tables 3 and 4, when compared to the evidence on the cultural environment from Table 1, is that they all lead us to expect high voter turnout in the United States. The American electorate is highly educated, has above average levels of party identification, and is more interested and more efficacious than citizens in other democracies. The relatively low levels of trust are not as important as these other American advantages.

These individual-level modeling efforts redirect our attention to contextual factors operating largely, it would seem, at the national level. It is possible, of course, that incorporation of attitudinal and demographic variables here unmeasured would succeed in explaining the differences across nations in level of voter turnout. It would be especially reassuring to see a variable for citizen duty available across countries.<sup>10</sup> But the comparisons



with political discussion suggest that the present variables, at least, are being measured fairly well, and that they do not account for the relatively low levels of American voter participation.

### Effects of Misspecification in the Aggregate- and Individual-Level Models

Thus far we have estimated the importance of aggregate and individual characteristics in predicting voter turnout in separate models. To use the estimates in evaluating the factors depressing or encouraging American voter turnout, we need some assurance that each model is being reasonably well specified, despite absence of the variables in the other model. We cannot fully solve this problem without comparable attitude surveys in all the democracies, but we can gain some confidence by conducting the individual and aggregate analysis jointly in the subset of countries for which we have both kinds of data, and within which the individual models were fairly similar. We can pool the 7000 cases in the six countries that have both automatic registration and voluntary voting, replace the names of countries with their values on aggregate contextual variables, and estimate the coefficients with both individual and contextual variables operating together.

The problem in this approach is that we still have only six countries, despite 7000 cases, and some of the contextual variables interact badly, creating unstable estimates. Nor do we have the degrees of freedom to enter many contextual variables simultaneously. We can, however, get some sense of the specification problem by using only a few of the aggregate variables. We can first run the model with these variables only, then add the attitudinal variables and see if the estimates change greatly. The process is reversed to ascertain the stability of the attitudinal estimates. The results of these procedures are relatively reassuring.

Consider first the aggregate coefficients. I ran the model with dummy variables for Switzerland, the age categories, and district competitiveness (coded single-member district, multi-district proportional representation [PR], national PR). Then I added the full set of individual-level variables for education, party identification, interest, and efficacy. The estimates for district competitiveness increased slightly after adding the individual-level variables. (The resulting model is that shown in Appendix 2.) Repeating this analysis using party-group linkages rather than district competitiveness also led to an increase in the party-group linkages coefficient by about 20% after including the attitudinal variables. Although the size of the coefficients is, naturally, rather different than the results in Table 2, because of the small number of cases and the inclusion of only one variable at a time, the analysis suggests that we can use the estimates from Table 2 without being too worried that they are badly biased by the absence of the attitudinal variables. Naturally, we would prefer to use the estimates based on the full set of democracies, rather than the six in the survey.

The results for the individual variables are also fairly robust, but show some need for caution. If we pool the six countries and run the individual-level variables alone, we get estimates for party identification, interest, and efficacy that are fairly similar to results including the aggregate variables (either as in Appendix 2, or with dummy variables for five of the countries). But the education effects, always somewhat weak and inconsistent in these countries, are estimated to be weakly negative after interest and efficacy are taken into account. Not until we include a variable for district competitiveness, or the country dummies, do we get the weakly positive education estimates we might expect from averaging the coefficients in Table 4.

The results of this exploration of the

specification problem suggest that we can use the estimates directly from Table 2 for the contextual variables. But estimates for the individual-level variables must either explicitly include contextual variables, as in Appendix 2, or use country dummies or an averaging procedure that implicitly takes account of such effects.

### **Estimating the Effects of Cultural and Institutional Setting on Relative American Voter Turnout Levels**

The coefficients estimated in the previous section can be used to analyze the effect of individual and institutional variables on levels of voter turnout in the United States as compared with other democracies. We must, however, keep in mind the unique nature of the American model, as shown in Tables 3 and 4. Because of the unique difficulty of registration in the United States, if for no other reason, it is difficult to be sure how the contextual variables affect American participation under present conditions. We shall approach the problem by using the coefficients estimated in the previous section to predict how turnout in the average modern democracy would change if its attitudinal and competitive conditions were similar to those in the United States.

Beginning with the individual-level variables, we have estimated the increment to turnout created by increased levels of party identification, education, interest, and efficacy. By comparing the percentage of the American citizenry with those characteristics with the percentage in the average democracy, we can multiply the difference by the estimated turnout increment to see the predicted effect of the average democracy developing a political culture similar to the American. For example, 84% of the American respondents stated a party identification, compared to 78% of those in the other democracies. If we multiply the 6%

American advantage in party identification by the predicted increment of 14% (from Appendix 2) for individuals in the average democracy having a party identification, we estimate that increasing party identification in other countries to the American level would increase their average voter turnout by .85%—a bit under a 1% gain in turnout. In the case of education, interest, and efficacy, we do the analysis for each category above the base-line category, and sum the results to see the impact of the full distribution on the expected levels of voter turnout. The analysis is shown in the top half of Table 5.

While the analysis is somewhat complex, the results are simply summarized. If citizens in the average democracy were as interested in politics as Americans, voter turnout would increase by 2.2%; American levels of efficacy would increase turnout by .5%. The education coefficients estimated in Appendix 2 would increase turnout by 1.6% if the average democracy reached American education levels. These education estimates, as noted, are somewhat unstable; using average increments from Table 4 leads us to predict a 2.7% increase; using a model with country dummies leads to a figure between these. We should note that while the education coefficients are small, the huge American advantage in education levels has a notable effect. Over all, the United States is advantaged by its political culture. If the average democracy had a political culture as facilitating to voter turnout as American education and attitudes, we would expect turnout to increase by about 5%.

We can do the same thing with the institutional factors, using the models in Table 2. The presentation and analysis are slightly simpler here, because we use the linear estimates from Table 2, and can make predictions on average differences between the U.S. and the average democracy. If the other democracies had

**Table 5. Predicting Changes in Voter Turnout if the Average Democracy Had Automatic Registration, but Individual and Institutional Characteristics Similar to the United States**

Independent Variables	Distributions on Independent Variables <sup>a</sup> (%)		United States Advantage in 1970s (%)	Estimated Regression Coefficient <sup>b</sup>	Predicted Change in Turnout in Average Democracy (%)
	Other Nations	United States			
<i>Education</i>					
Basic	36	5	—	—	—
Lower	22	16	- 6	- .011	.07
Extended Lower	21	13	- 8	- .003	.02
Middle	11	31	20	.026	.52
Higher	10	35	25	.039	.98
<i>Party Identification</i>					
No	22	16	—	—	—
Yes	78	84	6	.142	.85
<i>Political Interest</i>					
None	17	9	—	—	—
Not Much	27	21	- 6	.118	-.71
Some	38	44	6	.189	1.13
Very Much	17	26	9	.197	1.77
<i>Political Efficacy</i>					
No	49	34	—	—	—
Some	29	29	0	.024	0
Yes	22	37	15	.033	.50
<i>Age</i>					
Over 34 Years	63	58	- 5	.380	- 1.90
Nationally Competitive Election Districts Scale	2.76	1	- 1.76	1.800	- 3.20
Party-Group Linkage Index	36	13	-23	.450	-10.40
Net Predicted Changes due to:					
Individual Level Variables of Education, Party, Interest, Efficacy					5.1
Aggregate Age Distribution					- 1.9
Institutional Variables					-13.6

Sources and Variables: See Tables 1, 2, 3, and Appendices 1 and 2.

<sup>a</sup>Institutional variables from Appendix 1, excluding compulsory voting nations. Attitudinal variables for the countries in Appendix 2.

<sup>b</sup>Coefficients from Table 2 and Appendix 2.

the American levels on competition-encouraging constituencies and party-group linkages, their turnout would be predicted to decrease by about 13%. The weak American linkages between parties

and groups (and the associated weak party organizations) would reduce turnout by 10%. The low competitiveness of some American electoral constituencies would reduce turnout by about 3%. (The

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variable for changes in the chief executive, insignificant in both decades as shown in Table 2, is not included.) The age level increased turnout in the 1960s by a small amount, but decreases it about 2% in the 1970s, with the American lowering of voting age and the age bulge among the young. The net effect of all the variables in Table 5 is to lower turnout by about 10%, the American attitudinal advantage being outweighed by the institutional disadvantage on a 13 to 5 basis, with age adding another 2% disadvantage.

If we make the more heroic assumption that adopting automatic registration would create an American voting process like those in the other democracies, we would predict, then, that such registration would lead to American turnout levels some 10% below those of the cross-national averages. Recalling that turnout in the countries without compulsory voting (other than Switzerland) averaged 80%, we see that such changes would mean American turnout of the age-eligible would be increased from 54% to 70%. As discussed in Appendix 3, the presence of resident aliens, ineligible to vote, would limit this by at least 2%, to about 68%. Given the American institutional disadvantages (apart from registration), the U.S. would still have one of the lowest turnout levels of any democracy, tied with Canada and ahead of Switzerland, but the gap would be far less.

In comparison to present American voter turnout levels, the analysis implies that if the United States adopted automatic registration, or something similar, turnout might be increased by 14%.<sup>11</sup> This estimate is not inconsistent with that based on cross-state comparisons by Rosenstone and Wolfinger (1978), predicting that voter turnout in the early 1970s would have increased by about 9% if all states had had registration laws as facilitating as those in the most permissive states. It also fits reasonably well with the

point made by Glass et al. (1984) that average turnout in states with election-day registration in the 1980 election was about 66%, some 13% above the national average. None of these states, of course, had automatic or compulsory registration. (The 1980 comparison, however, does not consider other attitudinal and institutional characteristics of the states with election-day registration.)

As Glass et al. (1984) and others have argued, getting most American citizens registered would lead to a major increase in American voter turnout. However, the present analysis suggests that it would not lead the U.S. to overtake most other democracies in voter turnout. Assuming that the U.S. does not wish to introduce compulsory voting, the other institutional factors are probably hard to implement. To make the presidential elections competitive across the country by doing away with the electoral college would probably help somewhat, but not as immediately as the 3% constituency factor in the model indicates, as it is surely capturing some party system effects. And the single-member district effects at legislative and lower levels would remain.

A final point here concerns changes over the last two decades. As has been noted by various scholars, the attitudinal characteristics that enhance participation in the U.S. have declined sharply since the early 1960s. If the 1960-64 levels of American education, partisanship, interest, efficacy, and trust are compared to the European averages of the 1970s (shown in Table 1) the U.S. ranks first in each measure by far. As we saw in Table 4, these individual characteristics are particularly important for voting in the American context. The more negative U.S. dummy coefficient in the 1970s in Table 2 seems to reflect the degree to which the attitudinal advantages compensated for the difficult U.S. registration conditions in the 1960s, but not in the 1970s.

### Concluding Comments

In closing it is perhaps useful to separate the firm conclusions of this analysis from the more speculative ones. Comparison of voter turnout in the United States with voter turnout in other industrialized democracies leads to four observations in which we can be quite confident:

- (1) Measured as a percentage of the population of voting age, voter turnout in the United States is very low in comparison with the other democracies. It was well below average in the 1960s and has declined even further, while average turnout in the other democracies has been stable at about 80%.
- (2) The American attitudinal environment is, nonetheless, rather favorable to citizen participation of all kinds, including voting, although less so than in the early 1960s.
- (3) The American legal and institutional environment is inhibiting to voter participation.
- (4) As a form of participation, voting is particularly influenced by institutional factors, although attitudes are relevant.

Some other forms of participation, such as political discussion, are much less influenced by the institutional setting, and Americans are comparatively highly active in these forms of political involvement.

Although we cannot be quite as confident, it seems very likely that the unique American registration laws, which require frequent citizen initiatives from a mobile population, play a substantial role in depressing American voter turnout. It is also likely that these laws are responsible for the unusual degree to which education and other socioeconomic resources are directly related to voter turnout in the United States, even beyond their role (found virtually everywhere) in creating

the attitudes of interest and efficacy which encourage participation.

The specific weights that have been attributed to the various factors are much more speculative, for a variety of technical reasons. This analysis suggests that in comparative perspective, the United States would be advantaged about 3% by its configuration of attitudes (especially political interest) and another 2% by its education level, but disadvantaged 2% by the age levels, 13% by the other institutional and party system factors, and up to 14% by the registration laws. There has been a marked decline in the attitudinal advantage over the last two decades. Although the amount of its effect is somewhat in doubt, the registration laws are probably the most easily altered factor, as well as perhaps the most important. Changing these laws would still leave the United States with below-average voter turnout, but the gap between the United States and the cross-national average would be greatly reduced. Changing the structure of party competition to mobilize lower class voters, for example, is probably much more difficult, although blacks represent an obvious target of opportunity for the Democratic party.

A full-scale analysis of the consequences of voter turnout is beyond the scope of this paper. We can, however, briefly conclude with a comment on two aspects of the problem: system legitimacy and voter quality. A substantial debate exists in the democratic theory literature concerning the implications of high levels of voter turnout for the legitimacy and stability of democratic systems. On one hand, theorists favoring citizen participation have argued that higher levels of turnout reflect and encourage political legitimacy and citizen support. On the other hand, theorists concerned about democratic stability have pointed to the often undemocratic values of the less educated, and the high levels of turnout in such unstable systems as Weimar Ger-

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many and postwar Italy, to argue the dangers of high voter turnout levels.

Recent empirical analysis suggests that the theorists favoring participation have the best of the argument. Analysis of voter turnout in 29 democracies clearly shows a strong association between higher turnout and less citizen turmoil and violence. After controlling for various economic, constitutional, and party system variables, higher levels of turnout still seemed associated with less frequent citizen riots and protests, although not related to deaths by political violence or the overthrow of democracy (Powell, 1982, ch. 10). On the other hand, the countries with higher levels of turnout, at least among the more industrialized countries, did tend to have less durable tenure of the chief executive. From the American perspective, where a presidential system usually creates substantial executive durability in any case, the balance of the evidence would seem to favor higher levels of citizen voter involvement. There should be some channeling of citizen discontent out of the streets and through legitimate political channels without loss of executive stability.

The argument about the quality of the voter can be approached from two directions. On one hand, because of the effects of social and economic resources under the present system, there is little doubt that adopting automatic registration or other measures to encourage turnout of the less well-off would bring to the polls a total electorate somewhat less interested, efficacious, and informed than the present voters. We do not want to overstate this fact, because we have already estimated that such changes would only increase turnout to less than 70%, and some small effects of interest and education in encouraging voters remain. But some decrease in the present levels of voter sophistication (not exactly overwhelming in ideal terms) would probably occur. On the other hand, we must recall that by comparative standards, the American electorate is extremely interested and involved. Even the total mobilization of all American citizens would mean a voting group that is more interested, efficacious, and more likely to engage in political discussion and other activity than are present voters in most other democracies.

**Appendix 1. Voter Turnout and Institutional Characteristics of  
Twenty Democracies in the 1970s**

Country	Average Turnout as Percent Eligible	Average Registered as Percent Eligible	Compulsory Voting	Eligible Required to Register	Frequency of Change in Chief Executive <sup>a</sup>	Type of Electoral District <sup>b</sup>	Average Strength of Party-Group Linkages
Australia	86	91	Yes	Yes	3	1	33
Austria	88	96	No	Automatic	3	3	42
Belgium	88	95	Yes	Automatic	2	3	51
Canada	68	93	No	Automatic	4	1	29
Denmark	85	98	No	Automatic	4	4	43
Finland <sup>c</sup>	82	100	No	Automatic	2	3	48
France (presidential election)	78	91	No	No	3	4	33
West Germany <sup>d</sup>	85	94	No	Automatic	2	4	34
Ireland	77	100	No	Automatic	4	2	25
Israel	80	100	No	Automatic	2	4	—
Italy	94	100	Yes	Automatic	2	3	40
Japan	72	100	No	Automatic	1	2	30
Netherlands	82	98	No	Automatic	2	4	45
New Zealand	83	95	No	Yes	3	1	40
Norway	82	100	No	Automatic	3	3	37
Sweden	88	97	No	Automatic	3	4	42
Switzerland	44	85	No	Automatic	1	3	43
United Kingdom	75	100	No	Automatic	4	1	33
United States (presidential election)	54	61 <sup>e</sup>	No	No	4	1	13
Spain	78	100	No	Automatic	—	3	42

Sources: For registered and voted, Mackie and Rose (1982) and *European Journal of Political Research*. Age-eligible population calculated from United Nations Demographic Yearbooks, 1979, 1981, 1983 (based on census data, interpolated to election year).

<sup>a</sup>4 = Chief executive changed party hands 50% of elections 1960-80; 3 = clear changes, but under 50%; 2 = partial changes only; 1 = no changes in parties controlling chief executive.

<sup>b</sup>4 = national election PR or national pool for some legislative seats, or simple national presidency vote; 3 = large district PR; 2 = PR with three to five members per district; 1 = single member or winner-take-all districts.

<sup>c</sup>Excludes Finns living outside of Finland from voted, registered and eligible.

<sup>d</sup>Excludes West Berlin (not eligible to vote in West German elections).

<sup>e</sup>Estimated from University of Michigan Survey Research Center study; see Katosh and Traugott, 1981.

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**Appendix 2. A Comparison of Three Models of Multivariate Analysis of Voter Turnout in Six Nations:<sup>a</sup> Regression, LOGIT, PROBIT**

Independent Variables	Slope Coefficients			Predicted Turnout (%)			Simple Turnout (%)
	Regression	LOGIT	PROBIT	Regression	LOGIT	PROBIT	
Intercept	.347	4.15	4.08	84	84	84	84
<i>Education<sup>b</sup></i>							
Basic	—	—	—	83	83	83	85
Lower	-.011	-.009	-.016	82	83	83	82
Extended Lower	-.003	.021	.014	83	83	83	82
Middle	.026	.137	.139	86	86	86	83
Post Secondary	.039	.206	.208	87	87	87	88
<i>Age</i>							
20-25	—	—	—	66	67	66	65
26-29	.113	.342	.402	77	77	77	77
30-39	.173	.581	.662	83	83	83	84
40-49	.221	.787	.887	88	88	88	88
50-59	.218	.783	.890	88	87	88	87
60+	.217	.785	.895	87	88	88	87
<i>Party ID</i>							
No	—	—	—	73	74	74	68
Yes	.142	.516	.583	87	87	87	88
<i>Interest</i>							
Not at All	—	—	—	70	72	72	66
Not Much	.118	.353	.404	82	82	82	79
Somewhat	.189	.671	.747	89	89	89	90
Very	.197	.805	.863	90	91	90	94
<i>Efficacy</i>							
Low	—	—	—	82	82	82	81
Mixed	.024	.107	.123	85	85	85	86
High	.033	.148	.174	86	86	86	88
<i>Electoral</i>							
SMD	—	—	—	75	74	74	81
Multi-District PR	.112	.522	.575	87	86	86	75
National PR	.125	.628	.685	88	88	88	92
<i>Switzerland</i>							
No	—	—	—	87	87	87	87
Yes	-.250	-.882	-.997	62	62	62	62

<sup>a</sup>Pooled data from Britain, West Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland and Canada. N = 7191. Excludes cases missing on any variable. LOGIT and PROBIT from MVS/OS version of SPSSX; the program adds 5 to the PROBIT and divides by 2 and adds 5 to LOGIT; account is taken of this in the predictions.

<sup>b</sup>See the note to Table 3.



### Appendix 3

The problem of fair comparison of voting turnout figures raises many theoretical and technical issues. One of these is worth special comment here: alien residents in the population. In most democracies voting eligibility is limited to citizens. Population figures, on the other hand, usually include noncitizens resident in the country for a year or more. Countries vary substantially in the percentage of such aliens, largely depending on the presence of jobs and ease of access to draw alien workers and their families, but also depending on their naturalization policies in denying or facilitating attainment of citizenship by resident aliens. If we accept the legitimacy of the denial of voting eligibility to aliens, then the countries with substantial alien populations are penalized in column 2 of Appendix 1. Unfortunately, we do not have good data on percentage of residents counted by census who are aliens of voting age, and cannot systematically adjust our turnout data to remove them. For the United States we do have census estimates based on self-reported citizenship. This percentage probably understates noncitizenship; we do not know by how much. The census study figures (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1978, 1982) indicate 3-4% of the population of voting age in the United States were noncitizens in the 1970s. Adjusting the U.S. turnout figures to exclude these noncitizens would increase turnout of age-eligible Americans by 2%—closing only slightly the gap between American turnout and the democratic

average. As we can see in Appendix 1, this adjustment would not alter the position of the U.S. relative to most other democracies.

Moreover, while it is clear that some countries in Appendix 1 have fewer aliens than the United States, figures for West Germany, France, Belgium, and Switzerland indicate that they had more aliens in the resident population than did the U.S. (Britain also had more, but special provisions affecting immigrants from the Commonwealth enfranchised many of them rapidly.) The best figures and most aliens were for Switzerland, where the foreign worker population increased from 10% in 1960 to 16% in 1970. Moreover, a 1975 study indicated that 80% of these Swiss immigrants had lived in Switzerland for over seven years, although very few were able to become citizens under the difficult Swiss rules, which include a twelve-year residency requirement (Miller, 1981; Castles and Kosack, 1973; Krane, 1979). Excluding aliens from both Switzerland and the U.S. brings Swiss turnout nearly to the American level, and accounts for virtually all of the Swiss unregistered population of voting age. Thus, the resident alien problem does not seem to be a serious problem in American comparisons with other democracies, although Switzerland is rather sharply affected. (The slight decline in turnout as percent of resident age population in West Germany in the 1970s may well also be caused by foreign workers.)

### Notes

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1. For average gammas between attitude variables and turnout in the United States between 1960 and 1976, see Miller, Miller, and Schneider (1980). The correlation between trust and turnout is .12, compared to .37 for efficacy and .50 for interest.

2. See Niemi, Stanley and Evans (1984), and the references therein. For sake of simplicity, I am here ignoring the slight turnout decline among the oldest age groups.

3. See Crewe (1981) and Powell (1980) for alternative measures. See Powell (1980) for most sources used to estimate party-group linkages. These data were extended with data from the political action surveys and Euro-barometer (Rabier and Inglehart, 1981) study cited above, and with calculations from tables appearing in Flanagan (1984), Holmberg (1981), Levine and Robinson (1976), Linz (1980), and Valen (1979).

4. The one demographic group in the United States with highly differential party support is black Americans. I have not included black support in the American party-group linkage calculations for two reasons. First, because groups as small as 10% of the population are not included in the analysis for other countries, and would increase the linkage numbers in most countries if they were. Secondly, although Verba et al. (1978, ch. 10) and others have shown that blacks do overparticipate as a social segment, relative to expectations from their socioeconomic resources, they seem relatively unmobilized considering their potential value to the Democratic Party. While this may be changing in 1984, it suggests that party-group linkages depend on party mobilization efforts to take advantage of differential group linkages, and are not purely individual-level phenomena.

5. For a more extensive discussion of the Swiss case see Powell (1980) and Appendix 3.

6. See the very comparable relationships between socioeconomic resources and "political involvement" reported by Verba et al. (1978, p. 75) in their seven rather different nations, and the marked contrast they, too, found with voting participation.

7. See also Almond and Verba (1963) and Verba et al. (1978, ch. 12) for similar findings on differences between males and females.

8. Measurement of partisanship is a matter of current controversy too complex to review here. In fact, it seems surprising that the results for partisanship and turnout are as consistent as they are, given the different meanings and stability associated with partisanship across countries. But the coefficients in Table 4 do show some notable differences in the

impact of party identification on turnout. Measurement problems may well be responsible. The present analysis has been replicated using a measure of partisan intensity rather than a simple dichotomous partisan identification variable, with very similar results. In the case of Canada, it should be noted that the general political interest question was not available in the Canadian study. A question about interest in the campaign was used instead, which had a particularly weakening effect on the original Canadian party identification coefficient. However, that coefficient was well below average even without the other attitudinal variables. Efforts to use a provincial or combined party identification measure for Canada, rather than the federal party identification used here, did not change the results.

9. For similar results in a different study, using different surveys, see Verba, Nie, and Kim (1971, pp. 75-79).

10. American voting research suggests that citizen duty is the best predictor of voter turnout, and has not changed greatly in magnitude or power over the past 20 years (Miller et al., 1980). I have not been able to find comparative studies using citizen-duty variables in other countries. The Almond-Verba study (1963) does examine responses to a question on obligations that citizens owe their countries. Americans and Germans report rather similar frequencies of mentioning voting as an obligation—levels higher than the British, Italian, and Mexican respondents. It seems unlikely that duty is a more powerful mobilizer in Europe than in the United States.

11. It must be emphasized repeatedly, of course, that other, unmeasured, attitudinal and institutional variables may account for part of the difference. We have, for example, no measure of citizen mobility. Although its effects should be less under conditions of automatic registration, we would still expect less turnout from the highly mobile. This and other unknown factors are included in what here is ascribed to registration laws. For that reason the estimate may well be on the high side.

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