ELECTION CALENDARS AND VOTER TURNOUT

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This research examines the effects of election calendars and ballot forms on voter turnout. The ballot attractiveness hypothesis predicts that concurrent senatorial and gubernatorial races on a presidential-year ballot increase the likelihood that citizens will vote. The evidence in 1980 is that this hypothesis is true with respect to gubernatorial elections. The election frequency hypothesis predicts that the more frequently elections are scheduled, the less likely it is that citizens will vote in any of them. Presidential and state primaries are a major source of frequent elections. In 1980, presidential primaries, in particular those instituted since 1968, did depress turnout. Runoff primaries depressed turnout as well. State primaries held separately from presidential primaries did not depress turnout by an additional significant amount. These findings are based on validated turnout in the 1980 CPS Election Study.

Contradictory findings have appeared on the structural effects of changing election calendars on declining turnout in the United States. In an earlier article (1981) I argued that two twentieth-century political movements have altered election calendars in ways that contribute to low and declining turnout. One such movement originated with state political leaders who wished to insulate state and local elections from the national vote swings of presidential election years. To achieve this, many states adopted four-year gubernatorial terms and scheduled these state elections

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for congressional election years (Jewell and Olson, 1978: 49-50). With only 14 states now holding gubernatorial races concurrently with presidential elections, the presidential ballot increasingly lacks attractive state races to draw voters to the polls. One structural explanation of declining turnout, then, is what I will call the *ballot attractiveness* hypothesis:

> *The fewer the number of salient statewide contests on a presidential ballot, the less likely it is that an individual will vote.*

A second structural explanation for low and declining turnout is the frequency with which citizens are called to the polls. One source of this change has been the success of another political reform, the party primary. Between 1960 and 1980, 20 states added presidential primaries. Most states have adopted state primaries for the nomination of gubernatorial and senatorial candidates as well, and many states schedule these state primaries on different dates than their presidential primaries. Counting state runoff primaries, some states now schedule as many as three primaries and a general election in a presidential year.

Including municipal elections and other local special-district contests, an average citizen may be called to the polls over twice a year, year in and year out (Boyd, 1981: 145; Crewe, 1981: 232). In view of this expanding election calendar, turnout would be expected to decline even though citizens may not be attitudinally less committed to the norm of participation. I will call this second structural explanation of declining turnout the *election frequency* hypothesis:

> *The more frequently elections are held, the less likely it is that an individual will vote in any given election.*

Noting that I provided no direct evidence for these specific hypotheses, Jeffrey Cohen (1982) tested them with an aggregate data base of nonsouthern statewide turnout rates for the years 1960-1980. He focused on two elements of the election calendar: the addition of a presidential primary to an election schedule and

the subtraction of a gubernatorial race from a general election ballot. He found the addition of presidential primaries to be as predicted: States adding primaries experienced a greater general election decline from 1960 to 1980 than states that did not. Cohen rejected the presidential primary as a factor, however, because a regression analysis showed the variable to be statistically insignificant even though the effect was in the predicted direction. (Because Cohen was analyzing the complete population of nonsouthern states for the twenty-year period and not making inferences to this population from a sample, tests of statistical significance may not settle this issue.) Cohen found no evidence for the hypothesis that a gubernatorial race draws additional voters to a presidential election. He therefore rejected the second hypothesis that a less attractive election ballot has contributed to a decline in presidential election turnout. Hansen and Rosenstone (1984) report similar negative tests of the election calendar hypotheses, again using aggregate data.

Although tests using aggregate data are unquestionably useful, they are not definitive. A strength of time-series aggregate data is that one can analyze structural changes such as the increase in presidential primaries as a longitudinal quasiexperiment. Another strength of cross-sectional survey data is that the model can be directly specified in terms of individual motivations—the clash between a normatively felt obligation to vote and an increasingly demanding election calendar. The two approaches can often yield different conclusions. For example, using cross-sectional survey data, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980: 99) report that concurrent gubernatorial elections increase presidential election turnout from one to two percentage points, a finding consistent with other evidence that contested gubernatorial and senatorial races stimulate turnout (Caldeira et al., 1985). Using an aggregate time series, Hansen and Rosenstone (1984: 10) found no such effect. Ideally, then, theories should be tested with both cross-sectional and longitudinal data if we are to have the fullest measure of confidence in our findings.

I have retested the two election calendar hypotheses on the 1980 CPS Election Study, an individual-level cross-sectional data

set. The results are as follows: In 1980, presidential primaries—especially primaries adopted after 1968—did lower the probability of voting. State runoff primaries also lowered the probability of voting. Gubernatorial races on the election ballot increased the probability of voting, but a senatorial race had no additional effect on presidential election turnout. These findings were statistically signficant and substantively important.

EXPLANATIONS OF THE HYPOTHESES

The ballot attractiveness hypothesis predicts that, ceteris paribus, salient statewide contests will increase presidential election turnout. Gubernatorial and senatorial races are now routinely multimillion-dollar contests, with media campaigns designed to stimulate interest in candidacies and organizational efforts aimed at registering and mobilizing voters. That such contests should increase interest among a state's residents is quite plausible.

The explanation for the *election frequency* hypothesis is less self-evident. Indeed, there are several reasons why one would predict that frequent elections might increase an individual's propensity to vote:

(1) One reason is a *learning/habitution* model of voting, in which voting in one election has a reinforcing effect on voting in a subsequent election. Past experience with voting adds to one's familiarity with the voting process, and, in many states, voting maintains one's active registration status as well. In addition, voting is a normative as well as an instrumental act. Nearly all surveys of the literature emphasize that the turnout decision is tied to the norm of civic obligation (Lane, 1965; Milbrath, 1965). Acting on one's values surely reinforces them, and not simply because people are inclined to justify to themselves acts that they have already taken. Thus, frequency of voting in the past is a primary component of the Brody and Sniderman theory of voting participation (1977).

(2) *Investment* theories of voting would also predict that people who have acquired enough costly information to have voted for a

preferred candidate in a primary have an increased stake in voting in the entire election process in which the primary is a part (Popkin, 1976). To the degree that the acquisition of political knowledge and the act of voting itself are costly, a primary voter acquires a sunk cost in the general election. The plausibility of this explanation can be demonstrated by the fact that the voter validation component of the 1980 CPS election shows that over 90% of those who voted in a presidential primary also voted in the November general election.

(3) Primaries should also contribute to the *information* or *stimulus richness* of an election year (Converse, 1966; Hansen and Rosenstone, 1984). Even passive citizens are likely to be exposed to candidates and issues when the news media are following a year-long sequence of contests. Primaries, then, may reduce the information costs of political decisions for marginally attentive citizens.

In view of these reasons why frequent elections may increase voting, why should additional elections such as primaries decrease general election turnout?

(1) The most important reason is based on an appreciation of the role of *parties and campaign organizations as political intermediaries* between candidates and citizens (Polsby, 1983: 140-142). Organizations work to increase turnout among voters who are persuadable—whose interest can be quickened and whose candidate loyalty can be won. But volunteer labor and campaign contributions are scarce resources. When these resources are transferred to a primary election, they may not be available for the general election. Workers asked to begin their volunteer efforts in the winter and spring primaries may quit before the general election, if they volunteer at all. Political ads and organizational contacts in March may be forgotten by November. Anything that lengthens a campaign year may strain the political resources that are available in the critical period before November. If this explanation is true, then, it is not the primary voters who will be most likely to abstain in the general election, for we have noted that nearly all presidential primary voters also vote in the November election. Rather, the negative effect of primaries would be to lower general election turnout

among primary nonvoters—those peripheral electors who need the stimulus of organizational effort to vote in November.

(2) The incentives for an individual to vote may also vary with the *focus and decisiveness of a contest.* If one election is determinative, citizens may be more likely to commit themselves to the process than if a sequence of elections is required to decide an election winner. A sequence of elections makes a voter vulnerable to losing at each stage. (Analogously, a citizen may have a greater incentive to vote in a presidential primary if it is one of only ten than if it is one of thirty-five.)

(3) The *divisive primary* literature also predicts that primaries diminish general election turnout because the supporters of losing primary candidates are inclined either to stay home or to defect to the other party's candidate in November (Lengle, 1980; Bernstein, 1977). The high percentage of primary voters who were also general election voters in 1980 would seem to belie a hypothesis that divisive primaries contribute to general election abstention. Even so, divisive primaries may depress turnout because they may discourage the activists loyal to losing candidates from working for the party nominee in the general election (Johnson and Gibson, 1974). If so, a divisive primary may affect the turnout of peripheral electors who are not likely to vote in either a primary or a general election unless a good organizational effort mobilizes them. In this effort the forgone contributions of time and money by losing activists may be important.

(4) Frequent elections, especially those that comprise a year-long sequence of primaries and general elections, may simply *satiate people's interest in politics.* The repetition of theme, of charge and countercharge, the preemption of favorite television programs by political ads and commentaries, the divisive effect of political disagreements on interpersonal relationships—all these aspects of long campaigns and frequent elections may dampen the political interest of some potential voters.

(5) Finally, precisely because electoral participation is for many a matter of civic obligation, frequent elections may lead to the *satisfaction of the norm* and a less compelling call from the conscience to vote in the next election (Boyd, 1981). Considering

the large numbers of elections for federal, state, and local governments in the United States, it is not surprising that when civic norms collide with personal obligations or convenience even a conscientious voter may think, "I have done my duty; I can skip this time."

One intriguing implication of the election frequency hypothesis is that it may provide a partial explanation for low turnout in Switzerland as well as the United States. Swiss turnout in the four national elections held between 1963 and 1975 averaged only 53% of the voting-age population, the lowest of any of the 30 democracies analyzed by Powell (1980: 6). Powell and Kerr (1983) attribute this low turnout principally to the recent enfranchisement of women (1971), and to an agreement among the parties on a rotating, collegial executive that takes the executive choice out of the electorate's hands. But it is also true that a system of national initiatives and referenda constantly call Swiss citizens to the polls at an average of five times a year at the federal level, with additional referenda and elections in the cantons and communes. Sidjanski (1983: 109) and Aubert (1978: 44-45) cite the frequency of elections as a possible cause of Switzerland's low voting turnout.

Some of the calendar effect hypotheses cannot be tested with any existing data set. No one has collected individual voter histories that incorporate information on elections for all levels of government or for any significant number of years. Nevertheless, the 1980 CPS election study is quite useful for assessing the effects of federal election calendars on general election turnout. As an individual-level data set, it permits a well-specified model of turnout incorporating socioeconomic characteristics, civic norms, and partisan attitudes. Its contextual data include senatorial and gubernatorial contests, and the voter validation component has accurate data on respondents' turnout in both the presidential primary and general election. It is possible, then, to measure, in the context of a general model of voting, the effects of presidential primaries and ballot attractiveness on participation in the general election.

MODELS OF VOTING

Table 1 presents a regression analysis of the turnout model.[1] The dependent variable is turnout in the 1980 presidential election as validated by interviewer visits to election offices to verify the reports of the survey respondents. The entries in Table 1 are unstandardized regression coefficients. They can be interpreted as the effect of a unit change in an independent variable on the probability that a person will vote.

Because the South has had historically low turnout and quite frequent elections there is a risk of confusing the effects of election calendars with southern residence. Model I protects against this risk by specifying a nationally uniform effect for each election calendar variable but including southern residence as a dummy variable. Model II includes separate election calendar variables for the South and the non-South and excludes the dummy variable for southern residence because it would be collinear with the southern calendar variables.

The selection and coding of the personal variables follow closely the individual model in Wolfinger and Rosenstone, Who Votes? (1980).[2] The results are gratifyingly similar. (Because the coefficients for the personal and attitudinal variables in Models I and II are identical through at least two significant digits, Table 1 presents them only once.) Age is the most powerful predictor of voting turnout. The square of age with its negative coefficient captures the effect that the positive relationship of age to turnout becomes negative among the elderly. The apex of the age-turnout curve is quite late, however. Controlled for the other independent variables, including education, voting rates continue to increase to age 70 before turning downward, a finding that parallels that of Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980). Education, as all studies show, is also positively related to turnout.

As is well known, rootedness in primary groups and the community is consistently related to voting. The square of the number of years one has resided in the community is positively associated with turnout. (The variable is squared because through the ten-year period that is the valid range of this variable, the

TABLE 1
Two Models of Turnout in the 1980 Presidential Election

Variable	Model I		Model II	
Personal				
Age		.014**		(.004)
Age Squared		-.00009*		(.00004)
Education		.074**		(.011)
Length of Residence Squared		.0006		(.0004)
Hispanic				
Black				
Married		.105**		(.026)
Unemployed		-.075		(.055)
Disabled		-.111		(.076)
Party and Civic Attitudes:				
Strength of Party ID		.043**		(.013)
Republican ID		.035		(.026)
Citizen's Duty		.088**		(.014)
External Efficacy		.055**		(.017)
Contextual/Calendar:				
Senatorial Race				
Gubernatorial Race	.057	(.036)		
North:			.034	(.046)
South:			.143*	(.069)
Old Presidential Primary	-.055	(.035)		
Non-South:			-.115*	(.050)
South:				
New Presidential Primary	-.118**	(.040)		
Non-South:			-.094*	(.054)
South:			-.153**	(.050)
Registration Closing Date	-.004**	(.001)		
Non-South:			-.004*	(.002)
South:			-.004*	(.002)
Separate State Primary				
Non-South:			-.062	(.048)
South:				
State Runoff Primary	-.077*	(.046)	-.092*	(.045)
Southern Residence	.045	(.038)		
Constant	-.423**	(.103)	-.368**	(.109)
Multiple R	.44		.44	
Adjusted R Squared	.18		.18	
Cases Correctly Predicted	71%		71%	
Number of Cases	1376		1376	

NOTE: Variables without a regression coefficient had less than a .5 chance of being greater than zero in the population and were dropped from the final models. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. The coefficients for the personal and attitudinal variables are essentially the same for models I and II.
*Significant at the .10 level.
**Significant at the .01 level.

effect of each additional year is greater than the preceding one.) Similarly, marriage increases one's likelihood of voting, which probably reflects the opportunities for political discussion and reinforcement of voting intentions in nuclear families.

Racial and ethnic differences in turnout are completely explained by other characteristics of voters. Controlled for other personal attributes, blacks vote as frequently as non-Hispanic whites, as Verba and Nie (1972: 170-171) and Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980: 90-91) also found. The same is true of Hispanics.

Even controlled for age, education, race, and marital status, the unemployed and the temporarily laid off appear to vote in lower rates than the employed. The disabled vote in lower rates as well. Finally, strength of party identification and feelings of citizen duty and political efficacy are also related to the probability that one will vote.[3]

THE BALLOT ATTRACTIVENESS HYPOTHESIS

Table 1 offers partial support for the ballot attractiveness hypothesis. Concurrent gubernatorial elections increased the likelihood of voting in the 1980 presidential election by a significant six percentage points. Senatorial elections had no effect. Model II reveals that the effect of gubernatorial elections was far greater in the South than in the rest of the nation. If this is true in most election years, it is more understandable why Cohen concluded that the shift of gubernatorial races to congressional election years has not contributed to the decline in presidential turnout. Cohen excluded southern states from his analysis.

THE ELECTION FREQUENCY HYPOTHESIS

The specification of the election calendar effect is as follows: The election calendar of the state in which each respondent lives is coded as a series of dummy variables, such as living in a state with

a separate state primary or a state runoff primary. Presidential primaries are divided into two groups. Richard Rubin (1980, 1981: 201-210) has shown that in states that had institutionalized their primaries prior to the McGovern Commission reforms, that presidential primary turnout was significantly higher than in states that added their primaries after 1968. Because it is possible that primaries have different effects on general election turnout in these two types of primary states, I created two presidential primary dummy variables—old primary states and new, post-1968 primary states. The comparison group for these voters consists of people who live in convention states. In light of the fact that several studies have shown that early registration closing dates inhibit turnout, this variable was also added to the equation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Caldeira et al., 1985).

The model offers substantial support for the election frequency hypothesis and confirms the extension from Rubin's hypothesis for Southern states. Model I shows that presidential primaries depress turnout more in states that have recently adopted them than in states where they enjoy a long tradition. Model II shows the negative effect of the new presidential primaries is particularly strong in the South. In the North both the old and the new presidential primaries depress turnout by roughly 10 percentage points.

If presidential primaries depress general election turnout, what is the effect of state primaries? All but 7 states holding state primaries also scheduled presidential primaries in 1980. Therefore, we are seeking to measure an effect of state primaries that would in most cases depress general election turnout above that already observed for presidential primaries. In none of the models is this additional effect of a state primary statistically significant. However, runoff primaries do depress general election turnout as predicted, and the effect is a very sizable eight percentage points. The evidence accumulates in favor of the election frequency hypothesis: *The more frequently elections are held, the less likely it is than an individual will vote in any of them.*

Perhaps the most unexpected result in Table 1 is that southern residence is not associated with reduced turnout, once personal

attributes and election calendars are controlled. Although not statistically significant, the coefficient for southern residence is even positive rather than negative. Complex election calendars are one of the distinctive features of southern politics that help explain lower southern voting rates in presidential elections. The South held the most elections in 1980. Of the 11 southern states 10 had presidential primaries. An additional 5 had a state primary separate from their presidential primary, and 3 states held runoff primaries as well, for a total of four elections in 1980 (including the general election). If the election frequency hypothesis is true, then we have a partial explanation for southern distinctiveness, and we need not simply treat the South as a region apart by excluding it from general models of turnout.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The regression coefficients for Models I and II support the sizable effects of the election calendar variables. Ceteris paribus, a gubernatorial race increases the likelihood of voting by six percentage points. Compared to living in a convention state, residence in a primary state diminishes the likelihood of voting in a general election. This negative effect is about six percentage points in the old (institutionalized) primary states and increases to almost 12 percentage points in states that added presidential primaries after 1968. Although these estimates might seem large, in fact the actual election turnout in 1980 was 56.3% in convention states compared to only 52.0% turnout in primary states, a difference of 4.3%. A well-specified statistical model only increases the significant disparity in turnout between primary and convention states that one can observe in the aggregate election results. Finally, the predominantly southern runoff primaries decrease the probability of voting by eight percentage points. Although these estimates are subject to sampling error, and perhaps to some idiosyncratic feature of the 1980 election, the magnitude of these estimates supports the importance of *election calendars* and *ballot attractiveness* for general election turnout.

The ballot attractiveness and election frequency hypotheses nicely complement other explanations of low and declining turnout: the increase in the number of very young and very old electors (Boyd, 1981; Cavanagh, 1981); the decline in strength of partisanship, in feelings of external political efficacy, and in reliance on newspapers for political information (Cassel and Hill, 1981; Shaffer, 1981; Abramson and Aldrich, 1982); and the decrease in turnout in particular social groups, such as the young and low-income and low-education whites (Hout and Knoke, 1975; Reiter, 1979). The evidence for the election frequency hypothesis at the state and federal levels suggests once again how important it is that future studies of election calendars and voter turnout incorporate information on municipal and special district elections, for these are a major additional source of America's complex election calendars.

NOTES

1. A dichotomous dependent variable such as turnout violates the assumptions of regression analysis. A technical reason is that the error term varies systematically rather than randomly with the magnitude of the independent variables. Also, a linear solution with a dichotomous dependent variable can yield predicted scores that exceed 0 and 1, which would make the interpretation of the coefficients as probabilities nonsensical. Discriminant analysis is often used in this situation, but it does not offer any important advantage when the dependent variable is a dichotomy rather than a polychotomy and when one is using the technique simply to estimate the parameters of an equation. The discriminant coefficients are a simple multiple of the analogous regression coefficients, and the statistical significance of these coefficients is exactly the same. Moreover, the canonical correlation of discriminant analysis is just the multiple R of regression (see Norusis, 1985: 90). In short, one's inferences from regression and discriminant analysis would be the same. Nonlinear probit or logit models solve the problem of predicted scores exceeding the limits of 0 and 1, and better approximate a theoretical expectation that a greater change in an independent variable is required to increase one's probability of voting from .8 to .9 than from .5 to .6. I fitted the models in Table 1 to a probit program, however, and found that the nonlinear probit solutions are quite close to the linear solutions of regression. The T values (the ratios of the coefficients to their standard errors) are very similar, and the statistical significance of every independent variable in the model is essentially the same for the regression and the probit solutions. Because regression coefficients have the advantage of being directly interpretable as probabilities, I have used multiple linear regression in Table 1. The percentages of cases correctly classified come

from discriminant analyses that parallel the two regression models. These percentages provide another estimate of the goodness of fit of the linear models. The models in Table 1 are not plagued by predicted scores that exceed the limits of 0 and 1. For example, the minimum and maximum predicted scores for Model I are –.10 and 1.17, and very few cases are in fact beyond the legitimate range.

2. Briefly, the personal variables are coded as follows: Age is the actual age of the respondent. Education is recoded into six groups: grades 0-8; 9-11; high school degree; some college; B.A.-level degree; and advanced degree. Length of residence in the community is measured in years or fractions of years, with responses of over ten years reduced to 10. "All of life" responses are reduced to number of years of voting age for voters under 28 years and to ten for voters twenty-eight or older. Blacks are excluded from the Hispanic group. The married include only those married and living with their spouse. The unemployed include those temporily laid off or unemployed. The disabled are those who are permanently disabled. More detailed inquiries on coding procedures may be addressed to the author.

3. The party identification and civic attitude variables are coded as follows: Strength of identification has four ordinal categories: independents, leaners, weak partisans, and strong partisans. Republican partisans include leaners, weak, and strong identifiers. The citizen's duty index is the number of disagree responses to variables V143-V146. The external efficacy index is the number of disagree responses to V1030 and V1033. Missing data on the efficacy index are coded into the middle category and treated as valid data into order to avoid the loss of over 200 cases. A separate run treating these cases as missing data produced the same results.

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