

11/10/09 - What factors influence political participation (turnout)

Political participation is a general term that encompasses all political, economic and social decision-making an individual participates in. In this essay, I will concentrate on the most formal form of decision-making: the turnout. I will discuss Mark Franklin's argument that social strata (social status, wealth and education) only have a minor influence on overall turnout and that the main long-term influence is whether new voters develop a habit of voting or not (Franklin 2004). This essay will offer a fusion of both at the end.

Why not social status, wealth and education

Working out the influences on turnout is a comparative venture. Three comparisons appear fruitful:

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Comparing different societies (inter-societal comparison)

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Comparing different individuals in one election (intra-societal comparison)

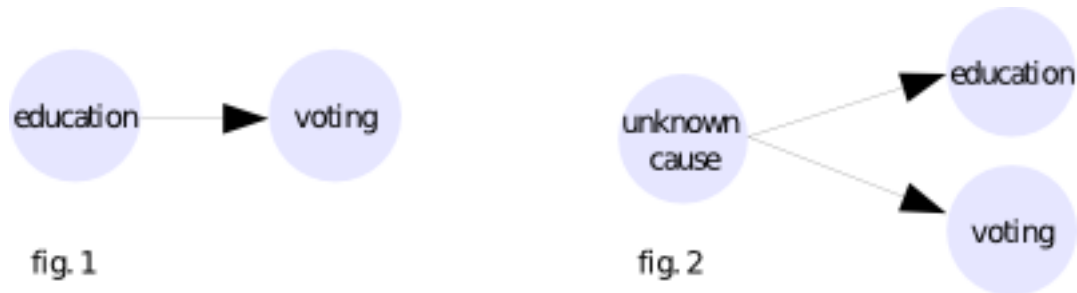
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Comparing different elections by one society over time (temporal comparison)

I shall use these to demonstrate that wealth and education do not influence turnout, even though an *intra-societal comparison* may yield the tendency that the wealthier and more educated a person is the more she votes. Only a *temporal comparison* finds that even though education has increased in all European states in the last forty years, turnout has dropped. This is further expanded by an *inter-societal comparison* that detects that, e.g. Switzerland and the US, two of the most highly educated societies, have a particularly low turnout. It becomes apparent that we must not confuse correlations with causes. Both of the following diagrams

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illustrating cause and effect would show a correlation of education and voting, but an *inter-societal comparison* shows that the second, figure 2 is correct and, thus, the true cause still remains unknown (Franklin 2004,9-36).



Even though, in any given election, in all European countries, we can analyse that segments of society with a higher social status, wealth, education and age will show an relatively increased turnout, this does in no way imply that these factors influence turnout. Mark Franklin argues that the main long-term cause of a person's participation in elections and consequently the turnout is none of these, but his or her socialisation and upbringing. Thereby he means whether she developed a habit of voting during the first few elections or not. Before I elaborate, however, I still need to address social status. In India 'the 2004 National Election Study confirmed that "the upper castes are increasingly turning away from the electoral arena, while more and more Dalits are firmly moving in this arena"' (CSDS 2004 in Ellis 2004). This provides an illustrative example, that social status does not cause voting even when both correlate sometimes. Social status, wealth and education are not the causes for voting, even though they might correlate with it at times. To assume the raising of one of them will automatically increase turnout, would be to assume that adding water to a soup gives you more meat.

Socialisation and upbringing

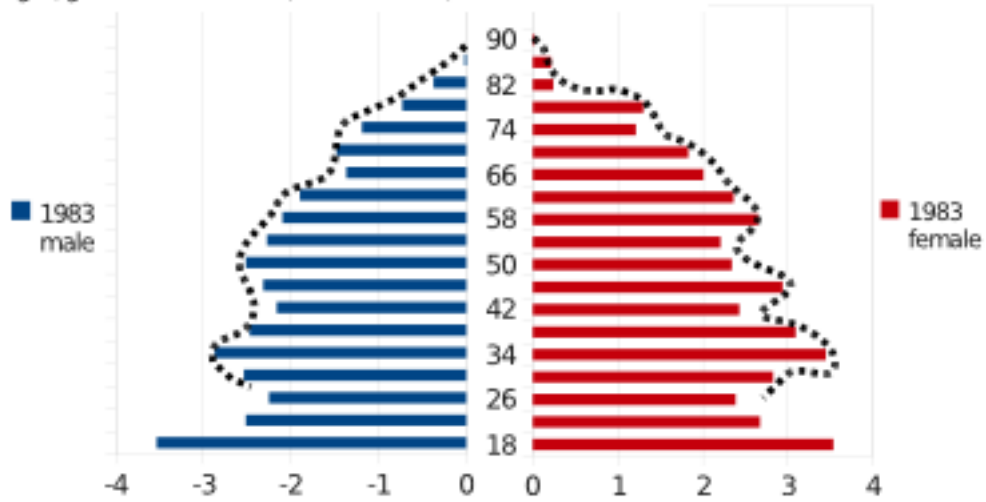
Mark Franklin's main hypothesis is:

'Voting is a habit. People learn the habit of voting, or not, based on experience in their first few elections. Elections that do not stimulate high turnout among young adults leave a "footprint" of low turnout in the age structure of the electorate [...]' (Franklin 2004).

I hope to present this argument accessibly by working with visualisations rather than figures. The idea is to present turnout levels just like a population pyramid. If the theory is correct about the importance of generational replacement, we should be able to analyse the turnout conveniently just like population pyramids. So, figure 3 visualises the UK general elections of 1983 in this way. The y-axis represents time as four year cohorts of voters from the bottom up (18-21,22-25,26-29...) and the x-axis is the percentage of the whole population the voters in this cohort constitute. I added dotted lines to emphasise the idea of a visual analysis and for later use also. These lines exclude the first two cohorts, because these voters are still forming their first experiences and we do not yet know whether they will become habitual voters.

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fig. 3, general election 1983, turnout 72.7%, data source: ESRC 1983



Now, before looking at a subsequent election in the UK, the general election 1992, let's formulate some expectations:

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the dotted shape will move up in *time* (habitual voters get older too)

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old age and demise will impact our shape at the top as it moves up

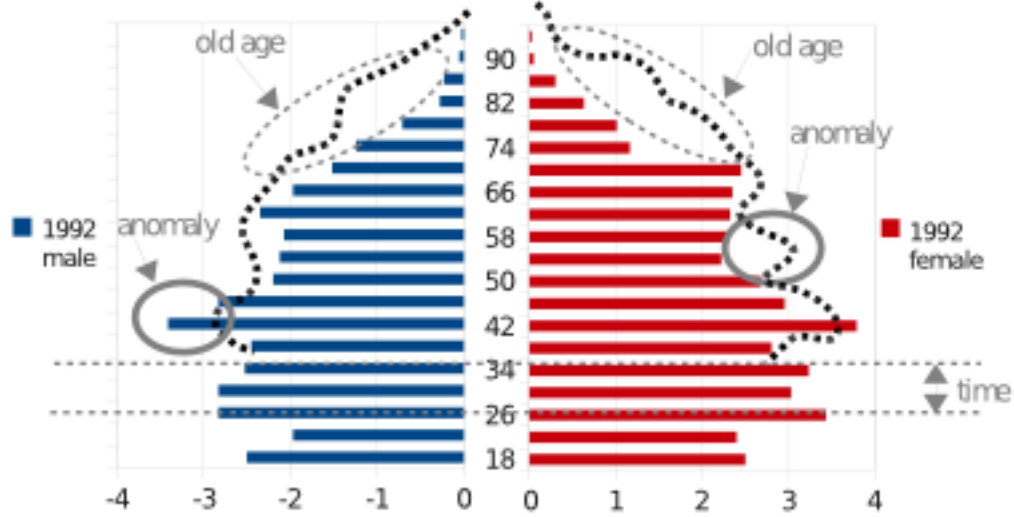
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our dataset, only two elections, is very limited (*anomalies*)

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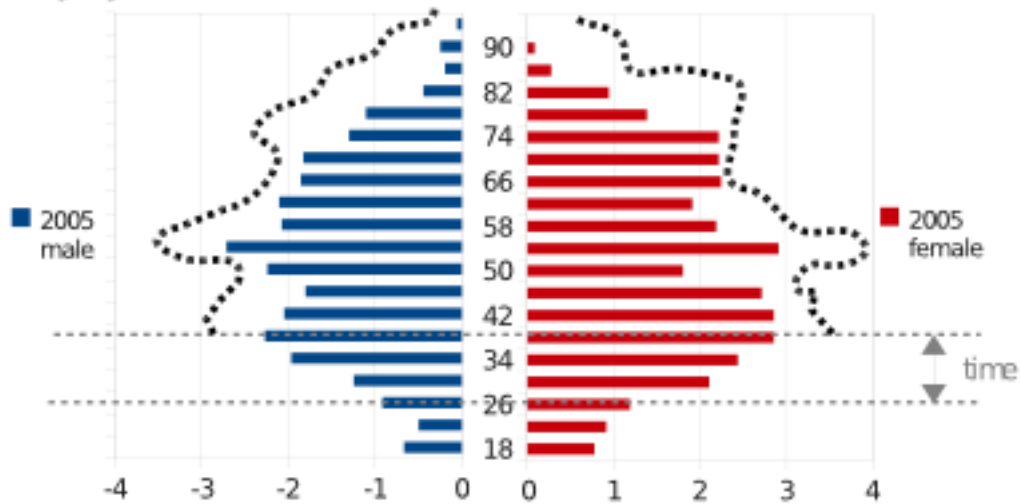
fig. 4, general election 1992, turnout 77.7%, data source: ESRC 1992



The *anomalies* I circled show that a cohort significantly changed its turnout since 1983, when we assumed that established cohorts do not alter their voting behaviour. It may be due to the limited data or have other explanations in external factors. Or, of course, the theory maybe wrong.

Compared to the long period of turnouts around 75%, 2001 only 59.4% went to the ballot; 2005 the turnout was 61.4%. Today we *know*, but can our visual model *predict* this? I added dotted lines again, which represents the shape of the 1992 pyramid moved up in time 13 years.

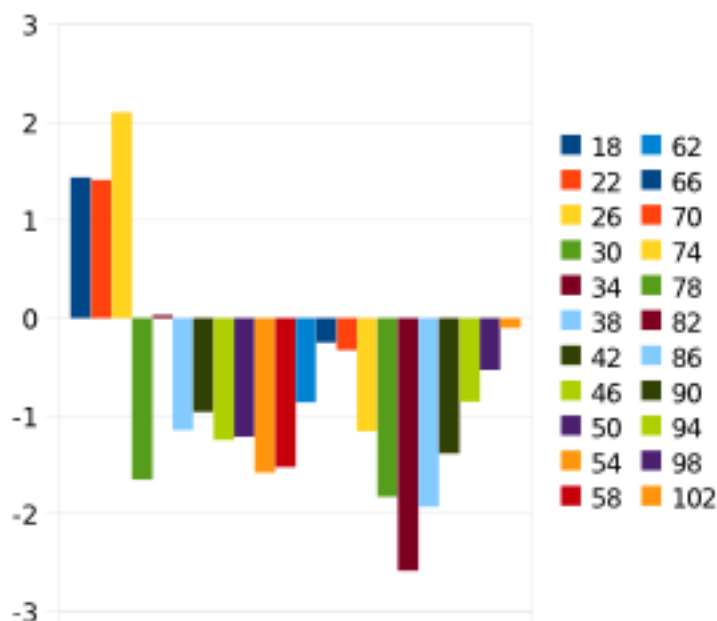
fig. 5, general election 2005, turnout 61.4%, data source: ESRC 2005



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Our model failed to predict the downturn. So, even though we showed that habitual voting is influential, we must fully acknowledge that external factors are in play among established cohorts too. A marked decrease of turnout among the two youngest cohorts is apparent. If habit plays a role, this is significant. In crude terms, while high turnout cohorts die, only low turnout cohorts get to the voting age. In figure 6 I subtracted from each 2005 cohort the turnout of the corresponding cohort in the last election. So this is the difference in turnout of the same people.

fig. 6, change in turnout per cohort 2005-1992, data source: ESRC 1992,2005

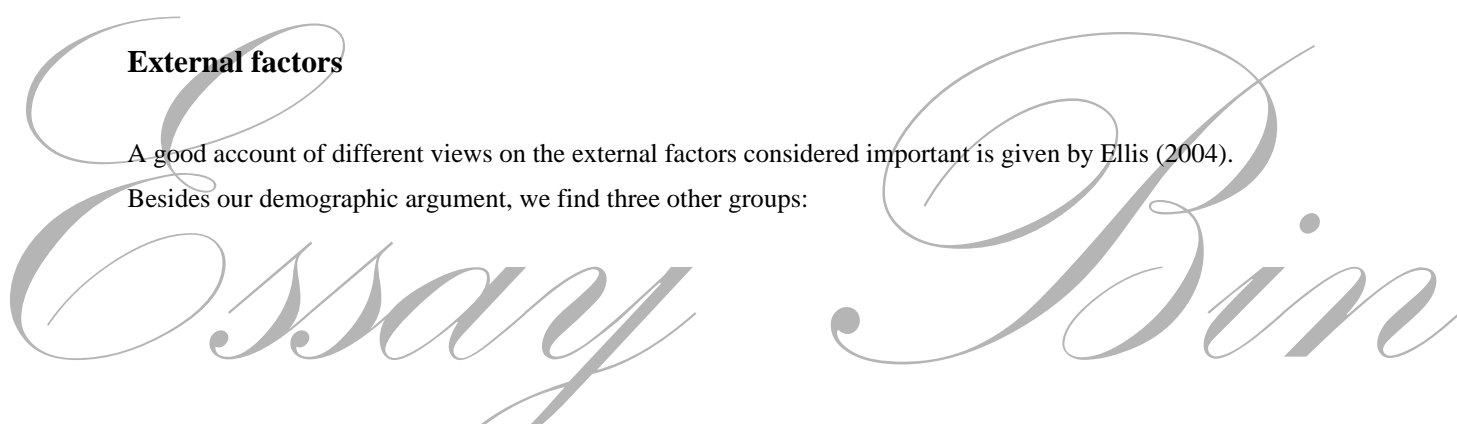


The power of Mark Franklin's argument, however, remains with this unanswered question: Can people, who never developed a habit of voting, suddenly show up in large numbers?

External factors

A good account of different views on the external factors considered important is given by Ellis (2004).

Besides our demographic argument, we find three other groups:



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Mechanical factors like the accessibility of the polling stations, which day in the week the voting takes place and even the weather.

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Design factors like whether it is a majoritarian or proportional election, from which the former tends to yield a higher turnout. Also a separation of powers, which weakens the effect an election can have, affects turnout negatively.

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Political factors like whether people consider the election competitive (majority status) and how close they think the result will be. Also, the identification with a party is thought to keep turnout up in elections that are considered less relevant.

With these factors, Mark Franklin (2004) successfully and accurately predicts the turnout of over twenty elections. Assuming we had predicted the general decrease in turnout, this alleviates the headache figure 5 and 6 gave us. Our predictions work better again. We see, our model must include external factors.

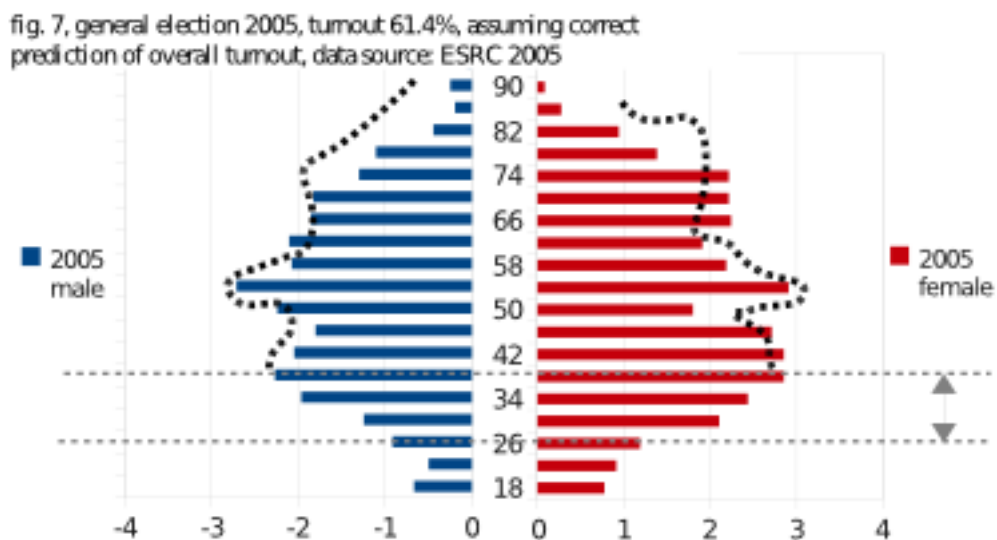
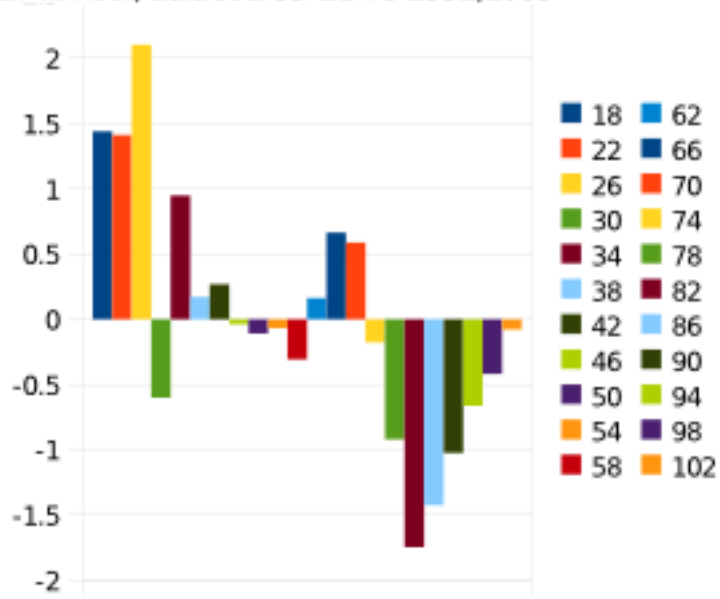


fig. 8, relative change in turnout per cohort 2005-1992, assuming correct prediction of overall turnout, data source: ESRC 1992,2005



Disenchantment

There is a widely held opinion that the growing disenchantment with politics affects turnout. Gerry Stoker (2006) analyses the debate and extracts the three culprits:

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politicians: they are seen as power-hungry liars, corrupt and incompetent

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citizens: the decline of social cohesion affects politics negatively

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globalization: the world maybe beyond our collective control

He eventually disagrees that these have a high impact. His own argument is that mass-democracy disappoints, because there is a discrepancy between what people think it can do and reality. This naivety, in Gerry Stoker's view, is the underlying factor for disenchantment (Stoker 2006,47-67). In the conclusion I will merge disenchantment with Mark Franklin's argument.

Conclusion

The idea of habitual voting in combination with external factors enables us to predict turnout accurately. If it bears truth that 'those who engage in other kinds of participatory activity are also those who vote' (Norris 2002 in Ellis 2004), this is directly relevant to the question posed. Maybe participation is a habit too?

Even if Mark Franklin's model does not need disenchantment to predict turnout, it does include it covertly as the 'habit of voting'. Why do only some develop such a habit? These pyramids rest upon socialisation and upbringing. The factors that influence this foundation are ultimately the factors that influence political participation. The climate in which young voters emerge from this foundation and experience their first elections is formative. If participation proves to be mainly habitual as well, the same hold true there. While young voters influence the pyramid by growing older, the established voters (parents, teachers, ...), the social strata (social status, wealth, education, ...) and the perceived current reality (climate of disenchantment, scandals, ...) shape the socialisation and upbringing processes and thus the base of the pyramid. Mark Franklin's powerful argument shows us where change in turnout most likely occurs (in the young cohorts), but not why. His effort, then, is focusing the general turnout debate on turnout decline among young voters rather than explaining it. Better guidance of young voters during their first elections seems necessary.

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