Chapter 2

Turning out or turning off? How the European Parliament Elections of 2004 shed light on turnout dynamics

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Abstract

How can we explain the low voter turnout observed in certain new members of the European Union at elections to the European Parliament in 2004? Several possibilities have been suggested in past research, and this paper surveys these suggestions and finds them wanting. It proceeds to ask whether there is evidence that voters in new member countries are responding to the same forces as in established member countries, and finds this to be the case. The determinants of turnout are the same in new member states, but there is a 'turnout gap' in some of these countries that separates them from other new member states as well as from established member states. The bulk of the paper addresses the question of how to account for this turnout gap. Some part of the gap can be explained if we assume that there is a learning process in new democracies that has advanced further in some countries than in others, but the bulk of the gap remains to be explained.

The European Parliament elections of 2004 were extraordinary in bringing to the polls citizens of 25 countries, ten of them participating for the first time in European Parliament (EP) elections. Turnout levels in established member states at these elections were very much as would have been expected from past patterns – which is to say low by comparison with turnout in national elections, but highly predictable on the basis of institutional and contextual factors, as we shall see. However, turnout in new member states was generally very low indeed, though highly variable. This was surprising in the light of expectations that countries participating for the first time in European Parliament elections would demonstrate higher turnout than at subsequent elections (Franklin 2005). If turnout in new member states is going to drop as much in later EP elections as has occurred for established member states moving to their second and later EP elections, then it will be virtually zero in some new member countries – a disturbing prospect.

One explanation, widely touted, is that the low turnout among new member states in 2004 was due to the fact that all but one of them had held referendums on their accession treaties, so that voters may have been suffering from election fatigue. This comforting suggestion ignores the fact that in 1996 three countries (Austria, Finland and Sweden) voted in a "special" European Parliament election shortly after having held referendums on their accession treaties, without apparently suffering from election fatigue.

Moreover, not all new member countries displayed low turnout at these elections. Indeed, citizens of Malta and Cyprus went to the polls in greater numbers than in many established member states, prompting Richard Rose (2005) to point out that the low turnout was a feature not of new member states but of post-communist new members. His explanation for the low turnout in post-communist states was lack of trust in political parties and the government, a legacy of communist rule. This suggestion seems somewhat quixotic, however. Political trust has not previously been found to be related to turnout in EP elections and its influence in certain studies of national

turnout has been shown to be due to the use of under-specified models (Franklin 2004). Rose's findings are based on an N=25 bivariate analysis, one of a rather large number of such analyses that he performed in order to explore different possible reasons for low turnout among post-communist EU member states. With only 25 cases, apparent relationships readily arise by chance and the more variables are tried out the more opportunities there are for chance to play a role. There is no question that trust in certain government institutions is low in post communist states, and also no question that the turnout of these states in the 2004 EP elections was low. This does not mean that the low EP election turnout was due to lack of trust. The correspondence noted by Rose could easily be coincidental. Multivariate analysis of individual-level survey data does not find this relationship, as we shall see.

Indeed, Rose's suggestion that we distinguish post-communist states from others seems to miss the mark. Not all even of the post-communist member states displayed particularly low turnout in the 2004 EP elections. In Lithuania turnout was 48 percent, about average for non-communist member states, and in Hungary and Latvia turnout was 39 and 41 percent, no lower than in Britain, Finland or Sweden. If all post-communist EU member states had displayed turnout in this range, no-one would have remarked upon the supposed low turnout of these states. Several countries with higher turnout had specific reasons that did not apply in the post-communist states: simultaneous national or local elections in four of them, or compulsory voting in four (Italy, which abolished compulsory voting in time for the elections of 1994, is an additional country that still shows strong traces of its earlier compulsion to vote, as we will see). So the anomalous turnout in these elections might really be a feature of just five states.

So what does account for low turnout among low-turnout EU member states? This question comes in two flavors. In the first place we need to know whether citizens of these countries respond to the same institutional and

contextual influences as citizens of established member states. If they do, then we need to explain what accounts for the turnout gap between the two groups of states. If they don't, then we need to consider the possibility that turnout in these states responds to quite different forces than in established democracies, making it very hard for us to explain the distinctiveness of turnout levels. I should add that it would be very troubling to political science if this were to prove to be the case. Other recently democratized members of the European Union (Greece, Spain and Portugal) did not show any anomalous behavior in regard to turnout by the time of our first EU-wide election study in 1989, by which time they had enjoyed democratic rule for no greater period than had post-communist societies in 2004.

Thus the question of whether, when it comes to turnout at EP elections, citizens of low turnout states respond to the same forces as citizens of established member states is central to our investigation. We will address that question first, before even theorizing about reasons for lower turnout in some countries.

Evaluating the 'Standard Model'

We address the question whether the same forces operate in new as in established democracies by applying the 'standard model' of turnout at European Parliament elections established in past research (Franklin 2001; 2005). According to this model, turnout in these elections responds to just three independent variables: compulsory voting (countries that apply compulsion see much higher turnout), time until the next national election (as this time shrinks, turnout rises – except for compulsory voting countries) and whether the election is the first such election in the experience of the country concerned (countries, except for compulsory voting countries, see a 'first election boost' to their level of turnout). The model does not rule out the existence of other factors, which might share responsibility for turnout variations with the three variables mentioned, but no other variable suggested

in past research proves significant when added to the standard model. In particular, turnout at the most recent national election does not prove significant. Even though countries do vary in their levels of turnout at national elections, this variation (once we have controlled for compulsory voting) does not account for variations in turnout at EP elections.

Table 1 shows effects on turnout among established member countries in 2004 (Model A, which is taken from Franklin 2005) and compares these effects with the effects on turnout when the dataset contains new member countries. When including new members it is necessary to decide how to treat the turnout gap between these and established members. If no allowance is made (as shown in Model B) variance explained is considerably reduced, years until the next election becomes barely significant at the 0.05 level and the first election boost appears to vanish completely (the effect is smaller than its standard error). If we follow Rose's suggestion of distinguishing post-communist countries from other new members (as we do in Model C) the model performs much better, though effects (particularly the first election boost) are substantially different from those found among established members. If, instead of distinguishing post-communist new members from the rest, we instead distinguish just the five countries that had particularly low turnout in 2004 (as we do in Model D), the model performs better still, yielding coefficients for other independent variables that are virtually indistinguishable from those in Model A.

This model tells us that new member countries behaved just like established member countries in 2004, so long as we take account of the particularly low turnout registered by five of them. In all countries (including the five with particularly low turnout) it is reasonable to assume that a first election boost was in fact experienced,[1] in all countries there is an apparently identical effect of time until the next election, and in all countries the effect of compulsory voting (or the lack of it) appears very similar.[2]

Table 1: Comparing effects of the 'standard model' of turnout at European Parliament elections when new member countries are treated in different ways.

Variable	Model A[a] b	Model B[b] b	Model C[b] b	Model D[b] b
(Constant)	52.9 (2.4)***	51.5 (3.0)***	52.5 (2.4)***	53.1 (2.4)***
Compulsory voting in country[c]	33.0 (3.0)***	33.6 (3.7)***	32.8 (2.9)***	32.2 (2.9)***
Years until next national election[d]	-2.8 (0.8)***	-2.2 (1.1)*	-2.6 (0.8)**	-2.8 (0.8)***
First EP election held in country[d]	10.9 (2.9)***	1.5 (3.1)	13.3 (2.9)***	9.9 (2.7)***
Post-communist country			-29.7 (4.1)***	
Low turnout country				-34.0 (4.6)***
Adjusted variance explained	0.806	0.684	0.803	0.805
N	79	89	89	89

a. From Franklin (2005) – aggregate data from 1979 to 2004 omitting countries that were new members in 2004..

b. Aggregate data from 1979 to 2004, all available cases.

c. Treating Italy as 0.875, 0.75, 0.675 of a compulsory voting country in 1994, 1999 and 2004 (see text).

d. Except for compulsory voting countries (coded 0).

These findings are quite encouraging. It does not appear that citizens of the new member states are reacting differently to European Parliament elections than citizens of established member states (though this conclusion can only be tentative for the five states with particularly low turnout – see footnotes 1 and 2). Our task is now to establish, if we can, why five of these countries displayed such very low turnout. Note that it is still an open question whether the five states with particularly low turnout should be distinguished from other post-communist states. If we cannot find anything that distinguishes them from the other post-communist states (but can find something that distinguishes all post-communist states from other member states) this would not do violence to our aggregate-level findings. Though Model D does appear to perform better than Model C, the differences are certainly not statistically significant.

Understanding low turnout in some new member states

In this paper I propose that the reason for particularly low turnout in some new member states might not be so much the legacy of communist rule, as Rose suggested, but rather features of these countries that are connected with their status as relatively new democracies. Mass publics in established democracies have been found to be quite sophisticated in many respects (for a survey see van der Eijk and Franklin 2006), but it may well take time for that degree of sophistication to develop. European Parliament elections are occasions when electorates display considerable sophistication (indeed, it was our study of EP elections that prompted our realization of the full extent of electoral sophistication: see van der Eijk, Franklin, et al. 1996). Mass publics in established democracies also have long-established commitments to political parties and to the "rules of the game" of politics, which may bring them loyally to the polls even in an election which has no purpose that is apparent to them. Moreover, such elections provide voters with opportunities for various sorts of expressive voting, as described in van der Eijk, Oppenhuis and Franklin (1996). A desire to seize those opportunities may be one thing that brings voters to the polls.

In recent work, van der Brug and Franklin (2005) established that party preferences in post-communist EU member states are formed in very much the same way as in more established member states, but this does not rule out differences that could account for lower turnout. Indeed, the quasi-experimental laboratory that the 2004 European Parliament elections provide could prove very useful in shedding light on turnout dynamics generally, especially if certain post-communist states have been found to be developing faster than others in the direction of more sophisticated voting behavior.

Taking advantage of this opportunity requires survey data, and we are fortunate to have at our disposal surveys of about 1000 voters per country conducted in 19 of the countries that took part in the 2004 EP elections – all except Belgium, Estonia, Lithuania, Luxrmbourg, Malta, and Sweden (countries that either were not surveyed at all or for which critical variables are missing from the surveys). These surveys form part of the European Elections Study 2004 (EES04), details of which are provided in an appendix.

To evaluate the effects of party loyalty and the "rules of the game," the EES04 contain a battery of questions relevant to testing conventional ideas about voters' political resources and the extent to which they are susceptible to mobilization pressures (see Franklin 2004 for a survey of relevant variables). In addition to conventional variables, we also have a measure specific to the European Election studies of the propensity (on a 10-point scale) of each respondent to vote for each party. Past research (Franklin, van der Eijk and Oppenhuis 1996) has shown that this variable does provide additional power to discriminate between voters and non-voters at European Parliament elections. Those who claim to be more likely to vote for their most preferred party do in fact vote at a higher rate, even controlling for other influences on electoral participation. In this research I have added a second measure derived from the vote propensity questions, expected to provide additional discriminating power: the difference between respondents' propensities to vote for their most preferred party and their mean propensity to support all parties. The idea here is that for voters whose support for their most preferred party is barely ahead of their general support for all parties, it will not make much difference who wins, whereas voters who distinguish more clearly between their most preferred party and other parties are more likely to want to express that difference.

In this research I also test another new idea. Some voters whose preferences are tied as between two or more parties may find in European Parliament elections an opportunity to vote for a party that they were unable to vote for

at the previous national election, simply because, at that election, they were only allowed to cast one vote. European Parliament elections provide such voters with an opportunity to express this support, and so the participation rate among those with relevant motivations (those with more than one party tied for first place) may well be higher. This would be particularly true if their propensity to support these parties was high, so we again employ two variables to operationalize this idea.

Table 2 displays the mean values for these five variables, along with mean values for a selected set of conventional measures of voters' resources and susceptibility to mobilization, divided into separate columns for citizens from low turnout countries, citizens from other post-communist countries, and citizens of more established democracies (including two countries that were new EU members in 2004). The variables have been coded such that higher values should yield higher turnout, on the basis of expectations derived from other research; and we see that, for most of the conventional resource and mobilization variables, mean values are indeed higher for other countries (in the last column of means) than for low turnout countries (in the first column of means). Values for other post-communist countries generally fall in between (occasionally they equal or exceed the values for other countries). Only for two of these variables – 'left-right extremism' (how far each responded places themselves from the midpoint of the scale) and 'EU good for country' – is the pattern reversed, with low turnout countries having a higher mean than established member states. So there does seem to be a prime facie reason to suppose that we can explain at least part of the difference between low turnout countries and other countries on the basis of these variables.

Table 2: Differences between mean values of selected independent variables for different categories of countries

	Low turnout countries	Other post-communist	Established members plus Cyprus
Conventional resource and mobilization variables:			
Interested in EP election	2.02	2.08	2.19
Read newspaper	3.25	3.34	4.14
Trust national parliament	3.97	4.54	5.53
Trust European Parliament	4.54	5.39	4.77
Trust government	4.17	4.46	5.18
Left-right extremism	1.98	1.92	1.88
Political interest	2.14	2.08	2.30
EU good for country	1.83	1.87	1.71
Satisfaction with EU democracy[a]	2.05	2.21	2.43
Approval of government	1.29	1.45	1.41
How close to party	1.38	1.42	1.41
Years of education	18.91	18.38	19.36
Age	46.06	48.10	49.88
Age squared	2408.98	2615.78	7722.89
Middle class	2.31	2.00	2.47
Rural resident	0.28	0.36	0.29
Expressive motivation variables:			
Maximum vote propensity	8.13	8.05	8.27
Max propensity – mean propensity	4.46	4.33	4.40
N of ties for max propensity	0.69	0.40	0.53
Ties * max propensity	1.73	0.53	1.20
N	3914	2200	17665

Source: European Election Study 2004.

a. Specifically, satisfaction with democracy in regard to the EU Commission.

Expressive motivation variables are quite another matter, however. Three out of four of them progress in the wrong direction if our theoretical expectations are correct, apparently helping to dampen differences between low turnout and established member countries. Still, these expectations were only theoretical. No past findings confirm the effects of any of these variables, other than maximum vote propensity (which does progress in the right direction). So we should restrain our reactions until we have looked at the findings from multivariate analysis of these data.

Multivariate findings

Table 3 contains effects (first differences) of independent variables on electoral participation from logistic regression analysis (coefficients and robust standard errors clustered by year are presented in an appendix).[3] The effects shown are standardized beta coefficients and first differences: the differences between predicted turnout when each variable is adjusted by one unit while other variables are held at their mean values. Both are interpretable in much the same way as corresponding coefficients in OLS regression. The table presents three models, of which the first replicates some of the effects already seen at the aggregate level in Table 1: effects of aggregate-level variables on electoral participation at the individual level. It was not possible to include 'First EP Election' in this model because only Cyprus, among established democracies for which we have survey data, was facing its first EP election – and Cyprus is a compulsory voting country for which effects of a 'first election boost' are not expected (see Table 1).[4] The data are thus insufficiently differentiated to allow sensible effects to be estimated for 'First EP Election' (all the low turnout countries are first election countries and none of the established democracies are first election countries). Because First Election is not included, the effect attributed to low turnout countries (at -0.195) is less than in Table 1 (electoral participation looks higher in those countries because the fact that they were facing their first election is not taken into account). However the effects of compulsory voting and of time to the next election look much the same at the individual level as at the aggregate level. These variables explain a remarkable 17 percent of the variance in electoral participation, indicating the extent to which individuals are affected by contextual features of European Parliament elections.

Model B introduces traditional resource and mobilization measures.[5] These cut the unexplained difference between low turnout and other countries by nearly a third to 0.136 and increase variance explained to over 30 percent.

There are some surprises among the individual-level effects. Trust in the European Parliament proves to be a quite powerful predictor of electoral participation. Trust in (national) government, however, has a negative impact on turnout in EP elections, quite contrary to Rose's suggestion (though it is a very weak effect, only significant at the .01 level). The most powerful effects, judging from the values of the standardized regression coefficients (betas) are the aggregate level influences, along with only three individual-level effects: whether the respondent is interested in the EP election, whether he or she voted in the previous national election, and his or her age. In particular that last variable shows major 'start-up' and 'slow-down' effects with younger and older voters being considerably less likely to turn out to vote.

Because of the large differences between established and new member states in terms of the age structures of their electorates (seen in Table 2) the age variables alone could be responsible for a 3% difference in turnout levels. The remaining 3% difference that is accounted for by individual-level independent variables included in Model B will be largely the result of interest in the European Parliament elections and political interest, both of which have substantial effects and see notable differences in the right direction between different electorates in Table 2. Other variables will have made a lesser contribution, and 'EU good for country' will have had an impact in the 'wrong' direction (because respondents from new member states are more likely to report this sentiment), helping to counteract the effects of other variables.

The big surprise in Table 3 comes when we move to Model C, where we see effects of vote propensities actually reducing by 0.8 of one percent (to -0.144) the differences between low turnout and other countries that we would otherwise have been able to explain. The balance of effects of these variables are strongly in the anticipated direction, but when taken in conjunction with differences between the different electorates of interest shown in Table 2, all

but one of the effects results in a reduction in our ability to explain turnout differences between low turnout countries and the rest. Only the negative effect of the level at which ties take place, along with the 'wrong' direction of the progression across electorates in Table 2, yields an influence of this variable on turnout that helps to explain differences between the three electorates. But the effect of this variable is small.

Table 3 First differences (effects) for independent variables on whether voted or not, from logistic regression (coefficients and robust standard errors in appendix)

	Model A		Model B		Model C	
	First diff- erence	Beta	First diff- erence	Beta	First diff- erence	Beta
Low turnout country	-0.195	-0.186***	-0.136	-0.130***	-0.144	-0.138***
Compulsory voting	0.327	0.313***	0.274	0.263***	0.275	0.264***
Years to national election	-0.027	-0.083***	-0.034	-0.104***	-0.035	-0.105***
Interest in EP election			0.062	0.148***	0.061	0.145***
Read newspaper			0.003	0.024***	0.003	0.023***
Trust national parliament			0.003	0.022**	0.003	0.020**
Trust European Parliament			0.009	0.056***	0.008	0.052***
Trust national government			-0.002	-0.017**	-0.002	-0.016**
Left-right extremism			0.007	0.027***	0.003	0.012*
Political interest			0.023	0.042***	0.021	0.038*
EU good for country			0.010	0.024***	-0.009	-0.022***
Satisfaction with EU democracy[a]			0.009	0.016**	0.009	0.016**
Government approval			0.002	0.012*	0.001	0.007
Feels close to party			0.022	0.020***	0.021	0.019***
Years of education			0.001	0.017***	0.001	0.017***
Age in years			0.002	0.327***	0.002	0.305***
Age squared			0.000	-0.321***	0.000	-0.298***
Middle class			0.012	0.033***	0.011	0.030***
Rural residence			0.022	0.028***	0.021	0.027***
Voted in previous national election			0.195	0.223***	0.181	0.207***
Maximum vote propensity					-0.003	-0.020*
Max propensity – mean					0.013	0.065***
N of ties for max propensity					0.029	0.055***
Ties * max propensity					-0.002	-0.029***
Pseudo R^2	0.170		0.303		0.308	
Number of cases	28860		28860		28860	

Source: European Election Study 2004. Effects significant at *.05, **.01 and ***.001 levels.
a. Specifically, satisfaction with democracy in regard to the EU Commission.

We should digress a moment to consider why there should be countervailing effects between each pair of coefficients in this set, and why the progression across these variables in the electorates that we study should be generally in

the 'wrong' direction. The first anomaly is easily understood in terms of corrective factors. If we only look at 'maximum vote propensity' and at 'number of ties for maximum propensity' we see effects in the expected direction. Taking account of the difference between 'maximum vote propensity' and mean propensity, on the one hand, and the interaction of number of ties and the level of maximum vote propensity, on the other, yields a more nuanced pair of influences in each case, where the larger effect is somewhat mitigated by a smaller effect in the opposite direction. This sort of thing often happens when employing interaction effects.

As to the surprising progression of these influences found across electorates, our primary expectation (that maximum vote propensities would be higher in more established democracies) is in fact born out. That the number of ties for maximum propensity should be highest in low turnout countries is perhaps not surprising if we consider these to be countries in which party systems are not well-established, so that fewer voters have developed clear preferences for one party over the rest. Interestingly, this is the variable in which other post-communist societies deviate most from their expected location between the other two types. They actually see a considerably lower proportion of tied maximum propensities than do established member countries, suggesting that in these countries party systems have become quite well established even in the short time since the end of communism ([it would be nice if someone could suggest some references to literature that would support this conjecture]).

Discussion

The fact that the standard model works for countries added in 2004 (provided low turnout countries are recognized as such) is heartening. It means that new members of the European Union, even the post-communist countries, are not very different from existing members in terms of things that influence the turnout of their electorates at European Parliament elections. But this is

only true when we include an arbitrary dummy variable picking out low turnout (or post-communist) countries. The difference in turnout registered by this variable is not well-accounted for on the basis of theoretical expectations. We explain somewhat less than a third of the difference on the basis of conventional resource and mobilization variables, and a trifle less even than that when we take account of possible expressive motivations. This is disappointing. Evidently, whatever it is that accounts for the particularly low turnout of 5 countries in 2004 remains largely to be explained.

However, we should bear in mind that the same is true for low turnout countries among established member states. We focused in this paper on particularly low turnout in certain new member countries, but we do just as badly in explaining the low turnout of certain established members. We can of course do a great job if we simply include a dummy variable that picks out these countries, and label it with some convenient term such as 'Eurosceptic.' We might be able to do the same with the very low turnout countries, including a second dummy variable that applied uniquely to them, if we could find an equally appealing label. But labeling countries does not explain them, and a complete explanation of variations in turnout at European Parliament elections still eludes us.

Worse, we were quite wrong in some of our theoretical expectations regarding measures based on vote propensities, although we were correct in thinking these would affect turnout. They do, adding half of one percent to variance explained and providing effects that are comparable in magnitude to the most powerful of the effects of variables routinely employed in conventional individual-level studies. What they do not do is explain the difference between high and low turnout countries. Citizens of low turnout countries do not fail to participate in EP elections because of a failure to have acquired the sort of differences in vote propensities that we expected would be features of established democracies, nor because of less motivation for expressive voting. These variables all show differences between high and

low turnout countries that are counter to expectations. Turnout in low turnout countries would be even lower without them!

On the other hand, the fact that in all countries the effects of the structure of vote propensities have strong implications for turnout at European Parliament elections is an important finding. The applicability of the same reasoning to national election turnout should be high on the agenda for future research.

Notes

[1] The extent of the first election boost among low turnout countries cannot be separately estimated, since its magnitude simply alters the estimated turnout gap between these countries and the rest. However, the other five new member states show virtually the same pattern as established member states in this regard.

[2] Again it is not possible to tell whether the effect is the same for the five low turnout countries, since any deviation for these countries from the general pattern will be taken up by the dummy variable distinguishing them from other countries.

[3] Missing data has been plugged with mean values for all but the dependent variable.

[4] Malta was a first election established democracy that does not employ compulsory voting, but we have no survey data from Malta.

[5] In addition we include voted at previous national election as a surrogate for variables relevant to national turnout that are missing from our model. Without this variable, we explain only 25% of variance, but effects of other variables are hardly affected by its inclusion.

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