

Voting in elections

Author: Dr Scott Orford



Introduction

Voting in elections is important, yet levels of voting turnout have declined in many countries in recent years. This is both a political and a social issue (Blais et al, 2004). There are many factors which determine whether a person will vote in an election. These include social factors, political factors and geographic factors. Electorally, the UK is divided up into small units called polling districts.

Each polling district has a polling station which is the place where people go to vote on the day of an election (although a small number of people opt to vote by post). People are told which polling station they have to go to in order to cast their vote, and this is usually their nearest one. Polling stations are often in schools and church halls, but can also be in shops, mobile cabins, and even in people's living rooms.

This aim of this research was to investigate the types of factors that influence voter turnout to three different types of elections, and how this has changed over time, so as to make recommendations for improving voter turnout at elections. The research was conducted in the London borough of Brent. The three different types of elections, studied, were: elections to the European Parliament; elections to the Westminster Parliament (known as General Elections); and elections of councillors in local authorities. The research findings are based on the percentage of people who voted in each type

of election, by polling district, in Brent, from the late 1970s to 2001. This was supplemented with data from two other sources: the Census of Population in 1981, 1991 and 2001 on the sorts of people who live in each polling district; and data generated using a Geographic Information System (GIS) on how far people had to travel, on average, from their homes to the polling station, and whether they had to go up or down hill. The case study discusses the social and political factors that influence voting and the importance of geography.

Findings

Social and political factors influencing voter turnout

The social factors that influence whether a person votes in an election are quite well known and do not vary much between the different types of elections or through time. Generally, turnout is larger in areas that have more older and retired people, and in areas that have people who are more educated and are in professional or managerial occupations. Turnout is generally lower in areas that have a younger population, that have lots of people moving in and out of the area, that have higher rates of unemployment and people working in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations, and in areas where people have few qualifications.

The political context of an election is also an important influence on the rate of turnout. People who live in 'safe' seat areas are less likely to vote than people who live in areas where there is a close contest between the electoral

candidates of different political parties – so called marginal seats. This can be very striking in local elections where electoral candidates of different political parties compete for seats in small areas called electoral wards. Brent has 31 electoral wards, and in our research those that were marginal showed a higher rate of turnout. This could be due to people realising that their vote could make more of a difference to who comes first than in non-marginal wards. It may also be due to the electoral candidates campaigning harder in the ward if the contest is very close, encouraging and reminding more people to go out and vote for them.

The importance of geography

Geographical factors are important in some types of elections but not all. In our research, turnout to General Elections seems not to be affected by the distance a person has to travel to the polling station or whether they have to travel up or down hill. However, turnout to local and European elections appears to be affected by distance to the polling station, and this also varies by how one measures distance. Crucially, distance measured along the road network explained the differences in voter turnout much better than simple straight line distance between a person's home and the polling station. As the difference between road network distance and straight line distance for each voter is not large (most people live within 800 metres of a polling station) this shows how sensitive voters are to having to go a short distance to vote in local and European elections. Distance travelled also seems to be getting more important through time perhaps reflecting people's busier lives. Interestingly, terrain was also an important factor in influencing turnout in European elections but not local or General Elections. The hillier an area was, the fewer people who voted. We hazard a guess that this indicates that for European elections people are more likely to walk to the polling station rather than make a special journey by car and therefore are more likely to be put off by hills. This may also be one reason why distance to the polling station had the strongest influence on whether a person voted or not in European elections compared to the other elections. Our research showed that locating polling stations closer to where most people live can increase turnout in a polling district by up to 5%.

Governments spend a lot of time and money on finding ways to encourage more people to vote in elections. One way is to make the act of voting easier. Three interventions have been trialled in the UK and in other countries:

1. All postal votes: Here everyone votes by post. This can increase turnout but there are serious concerns with electoral fraud – people pretending to be other voters and sending off several voting forms (ballot papers).
2. Electronic voting: Voting on-line or by text is common in TV programmes like the X-Factor but can it work in elections? Trials have shown that the technology is not yet good enough and there are concerns that it may also encourage electoral fraud. Another concern is that people may be made to vote for a particular politician by family and friends if they vote from home. This is less likely to happen in a polling station.
3. Re-siting polling stations: If people still have to go to a polling station to vote, could they be located in more convenient places to cut down the distance travelled?

Recommendations

As a result of our research it is recommended that polling stations be sited closer to where people live. Indeed, guidance for people who run elections now states that “if possible, [a polling station] needs to be close to where voters live and be fully accessible” (Electoral Commission, 2007: 25).

Conclusions

- Declining voter turnout is a big political and social issue in many countries including the UK. Whether a person votes in an election is determined by a mixture of social, political and geographical factors.
- Geography is important in some types of elections but not others. Going to a polling station to vote can deter people in local and European elections but not necessarily General Elections. This is becoming more important as people lead busier lives.
- Solutions that make it easier to vote currently face significant challenges. People will still have to go to a polling station to vote for the foreseeable future so policy makers and planners will need to make this easier by, for instance, siting the polling station closer to where most people live.

References

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- Electoral Commission, (2007) *Handbook for polling station staff – supporting local government elections in England and Wales*, London: The Electoral Commission