Satisfaction with democracy and voter turnout: A temporal perspective

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Abstract
Numerous studies conclude that countries in which citizens express higher levels of satisfaction with democracy also tend to display higher levels of voter turnout in national elections. Yet it is difficult to draw causal inferences from this positive cross-sectional relationship, because democracies feature many historical, cultural, and institutional differences that are not easily controlled for in cross-sectional comparisons. We apply an alternative, temporal approach to this issue by asking the question: Are over-time declines (increases) in aggregate levels of satisfaction within democracies associated with increases (declines) in levels of voter turnout within these democracies? Our temporal analysis of this relationship in 12 democracies over the period 1976–2011 reveals a pattern that is the opposite of that suggested by previous cross-sectional studies: namely, we find that over-time increases in citizens’ satisfaction with democracy are associated with significant decreases in voter turnout in national elections in these countries.

Keywords
cross-national, longitudinal, satisfaction with democracy, voter turnout

We analyze voter turnout and its relationship to citizen satisfaction with democracy. Cross-national empirical studies on voter turnout suggest that levels of citizen satisfaction are linked to voter turnout (e.g. Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Clarke et al., 2004; Franklin, 2002, 2004; Karp and Banducci, 2008; Norris, 2002; for European Parliament elections, see Hobolt, 2012). The logic that supports this observed relationship is that citizens who are more satisfied with democracy tend to be more politically engaged, and thus they are more likely to turn out to vote.

By contrast, there are theoretical considerations from the work of prominent scholars that contradict this conventional wisdom. While citizen satisfaction with democracy has long been tied to voter turnout, there is an equally strong consensus that dissatisfaction leads to higher levels of more direct unconventional forms of political participation (Gurr, 1970). Furthermore, the distinction between unconventional forms of participation and conventional forms of political participation has blurred because citizens may seek change through multiple channels, from protest to voting (Norris, 2002; see also Lijphart, 1997). Dissatisfaction with democracy will generate demand for change in the electorate, which in turn motivates a higher level of turnout. In a nutshell, when explaining theories of conventional modes of political participation (i.e. voting), we should not ignore the factors that contribute to alternative forms of participation.

We address the relationship between satisfaction and turnout by asking the question: what is the nature of this relationship within countries across time? While cross-national empirical studies of turnout far outnumber longitudinal studies, it is problematic to assume that the cross-sectional relationships identified in these cross-national studies must be identical to the over-time relationships within countries (Franklin, 2004: 14; see also Blais, 2006).

We address this point directly, and evaluate whether the relationship documented in cross-national studies between citizen satisfaction and turnout holds true in longitudinal
analyses (within countries over time). And the answer we provide is no: the cross-sectional relationship between satisfaction and turnout that we observe between countries is the opposite of the over-time relationships that we observe within countries. When electorates report lower levels of satisfaction with democracy, voter turnout actually increases. This supports the argument that is developed in the next section that dissatisfaction generates demand for change in the electorate, which in turn mobilizes citizens to engage in, amongst other forms of participation, voting.

**Expectations about the relationship between satisfaction and turnout**

Cross-national studies, based on the aggregate- and individual-levels, have documented a clear positive relationship between satisfaction and turnout (see e.g. Birch, 2010; Clarke et al., 2004; Franklin 2002, 2004; Grönlund and Setaälä, 2007; Hadjar and Beck, 2010; Karp and Banducci, 2008; Norris, 2002; Powell, 1986). It is nevertheless problematic to draw firm conclusions about causation. The reason is that it is difficult to control for the vast number of economic, cultural, and institutional differences across countries. Although this previous research is comprehensive in its approach (see e.g. Franklin, 2004), it is nearly impossible to control for all of the differences in political culture, historical experiences, and other factors that would affect levels of turnout. There are numerous (minor) institutional differences between countries that can affect turnout including how long in advance people must register to vote; how many hours polling stations stay open; whether elections take place on weekends or workdays; whether businesses are required to give employees time off to go and vote; whether voters have to show photo identification; how convenient it is to travel to the local polling stations; what kinds of ‘turn out the vote’ efforts political parties employ; and many additional factors. It is impossible to control for all these factors, which makes cross-sectional analysis, employed on its own, a problematic approach for analyzing the relationship between satisfaction and turnout. Over-time analyses may not perfectly control for all of these factors, but it seems to be an equally compelling approach to address the question.

Are over-time changes in aggregate levels of satisfaction within democracies associated with changes in levels of voter turnout within these democracies? This is an interesting empirical question because there are considerations that point in conflicting directions. The considerations that suggest that increases in satisfaction are associated with increases in voter turnout are raised in the cross-national studies reviewed above. If aggregate satisfaction with democracy decreases, this could indicate a lack of trust or fulfillment in the democratic process. That is, voting in elections may not be seen as an effective way of communicating one’s preferences, and thus citizens should be less likely to turnout. Abstention could be viewed as a powerful signal for decreasing satisfaction (Grönlund and Setaälä, 2007). Additionally, to the degree that civic duty plays a role in turnout, declining levels of satisfaction with democracy may also be accompanied by declining levels of civic duty (Goodin and Roberts, 1975), and subsequently by declining levels of turnout.

While the considerations discussed above suggest reasons why increases in aggregate levels of citizen satisfaction within democracies would lead to increases in levels of voter turnout in these democracies, other considerations cast doubt on this widely accepted relationship. This argument unfolds in two steps. First, it is reasonable to assume dissatisfaction with a desire for change. And if citizens desire change, they will likely seek that change through multiple channels, including turning out for elections.

While most literature stresses the role of dissatisfaction (e.g. ‘relative deprivation’) in contributing to unconventional action (Gurr, 1970), such a desire for change can equally affect conventional channels of political participation. Thus dissatisfaction should increase overall levels of political participation, including turnout in elections. Pippa Norris (2002), for example, links dissatisfaction (with public policy) to more peaceful forms of protest. With respect to voting, Norris (2002, 190–191) notes that, ‘early literature also drew an important line between “conventional” and “protest” forms of activism, and it is not clear whether this distinction remains appropriate today [. . .] [N]ew social movements may be adopting mixed action repertoires combining traditional acts such as voting and lobbying with a variety of alternative modes, such as internet networking, street protests, consumer boycotts, and direct action.’

Scholars who are concerned about unequal democracy echo similar sentiments. They emphasize that some citizens have disproportionate influence in democracy because these citizens participate not by voting, protesting, or engaging in only one particular activity; rather, these citizens are likely to engage in multiple forms of participation. Arguing for compulsory voting, Lijphart (1997) comments:

> it is especially the more advantaged citizens who engage in these intensive modes of participation – both conventional activities such as working in election campaigns, contacting government officials, contributing money to parties or candidates, and working informally in the community (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978, 286–95) and unconventional activities like participation in demonstrations, boycotts, rent and tax strikes, occupying buildings, and blocking traffic (Marsh and Kaase 1978, 1979, 100, 112–26). (Lijphart, 1997: 1)

If dissatisfaction increases levels of protest, it is also plausible that it will increase turnout.

In sum, there are conflicting theoretical arguments on this interesting empirical question. Several cross-national
studies report a positive relationship between satisfaction and turnout. They argue that satisfaction signals engagement with the political process, which enhances turnout. On the other hand, there are compelling reasons to expect that dissatisfaction with democracy will generate demand for change in the electorate, which in turn motivates a higher level of turnout.

The discussion above motivates the following two hypotheses:

**H1** (The Satisfied Voter Hypothesis): Increases in satisfaction with democracy cause increases in voter turnout.

**H2** (The Dissatisfied Voter Hypothesis): Decreases in satisfaction with democracy cause increases in voter turnout.

**Data and measurement**

To test whether citizen satisfaction increases or depresses voter turnout we developed longitudinal, cross-national measures of voter turnout and citizen satisfaction with democracy.

**The independent variable: Satisfaction with democracy**

To test whether satisfaction relates to turnout, it is necessary to measure citizen satisfaction with democracy. The longitudinal measure of satisfaction with democracy derives from the Eurobarometer surveys from 1976 (the first year that the satisfaction with democracy item appears on the survey) until 2011. In these surveys, approximately 2000 respondents per country each year were asked to place themselves on a four-point scale with the question: ‘On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in our country’.

Citizen satisfaction (i.e. satisfaction) is computed as the percentage of respondents who report that they are either ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ satisfied with democracy in a country election year. The wording of this question has remained consistent for the years of the investigation. Moreover, it is the same indicator that has been used in several related studies (see e.g. Aarts and Thomassen, 2008; Anderson and Guillory, 1997).

The authors acknowledge scholarly reservations as to what this indicator actually measures (Fuchs et al., 1995; see also Cananche et al., 2001). A possible counterargument is that this question does not measure the legitimacy of the democratic system but rather support for the performance of the system (Linde and Ekman, 2003; Norris, 1999). With respect to this point, we note that there is not...
a firm consensus against its use (Blais and Gelineau, 2007) and that supporters suggest that it remains a useful ‘hybrid’ indicator of important aspects of system support. Along these lines, they have commented that it remains ‘a reasonable (albeit imperfect) measure’ (Anderson, 2002: 10). Also, it continues to be employed as the standard indicator in a number of recent studies (Kumlin and Esaiasson, 2012).

Nevertheless, we addressed these criticisms from two angles. First, we estimated the parameters of model specifications below in which several factors (e.g. economic growth and unemployment levels) are included that control for ‘performance’ related variation in the dependent variable. Second, to address potential problems with measuring citizen satisfaction with democracy we conducted additional ‘errors-in-variables’ analyses (see supplementary material), making different assumptions about the assumed reliability of the measure of citizen satisfaction. Each set of analyses described above continues to support the substantive conclusions that are reported below.5

The distributions of the satisfaction variable are presented in Figure 2 for the 12 countries in the analysis. The box plots represent reported satisfaction levels with democracy for the election years in each country, and they depict several important qualities of the satisfaction variable. In the period covered by our data, Italy is on average the country with the lowest citizen satisfaction, while Denmark and Luxembourg exhibit consistently high levels of satisfaction. Portugal, Germany, and Spain exhibit the most variation in satisfaction across time, and Great Britain has rather stable satisfaction levels from one election year to another.

Figure 3 maps the time series of voter turnout and citizen satisfaction with democracy from 1976–2011 in the 12 countries in the study. One clear pattern that emerges is that turnout is in decline, which is consistent with previous research. The pattern is not as striking for satisfaction with democracy, although we notice a discernable upward trend in most countries. We also observe that inter-election declines (increases) in the percentage of ‘satisfied’ citizens tend to be accompanied by increases (declines) in turnout. The most notable examples are France and Great Britain where the two series mirror each other. When citizen satisfaction decreases in between elections, levels of turnout rise, or converge on the satisfaction line. Conversely, when levels of satisfaction increase, levels of turnout diverge sharply from the satisfaction line. Similar patterns emerge if one examines the series for Germany, Netherlands, Ireland, Spain, and Denmark. The mirroring patterns in Figure 3 provide a prima facie case for the Dissatisfied Voter Hypothesis (H2); however the next section analyses changes in voter turnout more systematically.

**Testing the Satisfied Voter Hypothesis and Dissatisfied Voter Hypothesis**

Recall that the Satisfied Voter Hypothesis predicts a positive relationship between (inter-election) changes in turnout and changes in citizen satisfaction, and that the Dissatisfied Voter Hypothesis predicts a negative relationship. This latter expectation is at odds with predictions based on cross-national studies, where levels of satisfaction are linked to political engagement and turnout. We estimate parameters of ‘cross-national’ OLS regression models to evaluate whether this relationship between citizen satisfaction and turnout is present at the aggregate level. This ‘cross-national’ specification is:

\[
\text{Turnout} (t) = B_0 + B_1 \text{[Satisfaction} (t)]
\]  

where Turnout \( (t) \) is the level of voter turnout in a country at the current election \( t \). Satisfaction \( (t) \) is the level of citizen satisfaction with a democracy in a country at the current election. And to address the Satisfied Voter Hypothesis and Dissatisfied Voter Hypothesis, our basic specification is:

\[
\Delta \text{Turnout} (t) = B_0 + B_1 [\Delta \text{Satisfaction} ]
\]  

H1: \( B_1 > 0 \)

H2: \( B_1 < 0 \)

In this model specification, we estimate ‘differences’ in the variables of interest. A Dickey Fuller test of stationarity suggests that both series (turnout and satisfaction with democracy) are indeed non stationary. For turnout even the inclusion of the lagged dependent variable does not
seem to solve the stationarity problem. Differencing the two series is not only an econometric necessity but it also makes theoretical sense. Substantively, our theory posits that inter-election changes in one variable influence inter-election changes in the other. Differencing the two series also deals with a problem of autocorrelation since a Wooldridge test of autocorrelation rejects the null hypothesis of no first order correlation with a probability of 0.003. Accordingly, we difference additional variables that are subsequently included in the models (e.g. Δ Unemployment). If ‘levels’ of variables are employed, instead of ‘differenced’ variables, this does not change our substantive conclusions (Table 1 Column 7, and Table 2 Column 7). The inclusion of turnout in the previous election year (t-1) for the parameter estimates for one of the models (Table 3 Model 4) serves only as an additional control variable and a more stringent test of our hypotheses.

Results for the cross-national and basic specifications

The analysis encompassed 90 election year measures of citizen satisfaction in Britain, Italy, Denmark, Belgium, France, Greece, Spain, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Ireland, and Germany in the period 1976–2011. These countries were selected based on the coverage of the Eurobarometer survey which consistently asks citizens to evaluate satisfaction with democracy with the same question dating back to the mid-1970s. For the cross-sectional models, Models 1–2, we pool these observations and cluster standard errors by country. For Models 3–4, where the variables have been differenced, we estimate robust standard errors and (given our emphasis on within country variation) control for country-specific effects.
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