

Low turnout: Threat to democracy or blessing in disguise? Consequences of citizens' varying tendencies to vote

Martin Rosema*

Department of Political Science, University of Twente, P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands

Abstract

This article contrasts the view on low turnout as a threat to democracy with the unfashionable argument that low turnout might be a blessing in disguise. The political sophistication of those who participate is then relatively high, and their choices presumably better. This is consistent with the key functions of elections: mandate and accountability. Analyses based on the European Election Study 1999 show that the level of turnout not only affects how well particular groups are represented at the polls (potential threat), but also show how well their voting links up with the mandate and accountability function of elections (potential blessing). The effects are of limited size and counterbalance each other, which means that from neither perspective does low turnout really matter. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Low turnout in elections is a serious threat to democracy. One reason lies in the fact that voters do not abstain at random. Certain groups of voters are more likely to abstain than others. Because politicians primarily serve interests of those who (may) vote for them, interests of some citizens are not as well served as those of others. This is at odds with the widely accepted normative view that in a democracy each citizen should have equal influence (Dahl, 1989).

The above view is supported by politicians and political scientists alike (see, for example, Lijphart, 1997). Research has shown that voters and non-voters indeed differ in terms of relevant social characteristics and the assumption that politicians take into account voters'

interests more strongly appears to be valid (Lutz and Marsh, 2007). Other researchers, however, have challenged the idea that low turnout is a problem. They found that differences between voters and non-voters in terms of policy preferences or ideological orientations are at most rather limited. Moreover, elections would usually not have resulted in a different outcome had the non-voters also gone to the polls. Hence, in their view, low turnout does not matter (see other contributions in this issue).

This article takes the argument one step further and contrasts the view that low turnout is a threat to democracy with the unfashionable argument that low turnout might, in fact, be a good thing. The argument builds on the fact that voters may choose on the basis of different considerations. Some of those considerations will be related to the purpose that elections serve but others might not. If certain groups of voters base their choice on considerations that do not enhance the primary

* Tel.: +31 53 489 3897; fax: +31 53 489 2159.

E-mail address: m.rosema@utwente.nl

functions of elections, the abstention of these voters need not be considered problematic. The argument can be summarised on the basis of the following question. What would be preferable: a high-turnout election in which all voters decide by flipping a coin or rolling a dice or by basing their choice on the good or bad looks of the leading politicians, or a low-turnout election in which all voters decide on the basis of judgements concerning the performance and plans of the competing parties or candidates? Arguably, the latter situation would be preferable. The reason is that in the latter instance the function of elections is fulfilled by the manner in which voters make their choice.

The choice described may well reflect a trade-off in real life electoral politics. Voters who are less interested in, and less informed about, politics are presumably the first to abstain. Consequently, if turnout is relatively low, the average level of political sophistication of those who cast a ballot is relatively high. If the considerations upon which their choices are based are consistent with the function of elections, whereas considerations of non-voters, were they to vote, are not, low turnout might be considered preferable to high turnout. Low turnout would then be a blessing in disguise.

The key questions, then, are whether voters who have a stronger tendency to vote differ in terms of the kind of considerations on which they base their vote choice from those who have a weaker tendency to vote, and to what extent these considerations are consistent with the function of elections. In order to analyse this it must first be made clear that what are the functions of elections. Katz (1997, chap. 7) identified a variety of functions, such as legitimisation of the political system, installation and selection of officials, establishment of representation and the provision of an occasion for popular involvement in politics. For advocates of participatory democracy, the latter function would presumably be sufficient a basis to conclude that the act of voting is valuable per se and any deviation from full turnout is evaluated negatively (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984).

The starting point of this article is somewhat more narrow, namely the assumption that the key function of elections is 'giving citizens influence over policy-makers' (Powell, 2000, p. 3). Elections are thus valued as a means to establish particular mass-elite linkages. According to Powell (2000) citizens can influence government decisions in four ways, which are based on two dimensions of choice: target of choice (collective government or representative agent) and temporal direction (retrospective or prospective). With respect to collective government the functions of elections are holding past

governments accountable (retrospective) and providing future governments with a mandate (prospective). If elections do not result directly in a particular government, coalition building by representative agents link voters' choices at the polls to the selection of government. The function of elections in terms of government selection is then performed indirectly, namely through accountability and mandate in relation to voters' representatives.

To what extent these two functions of elections (accountability and mandate) are performed properly in a democracy depends on why people vote the way they do. Voters may have a wide variety of reasons to vote in a particular way. Some clearly are consistent with the aforementioned functions, whereas others are not. More specifically, if voters base their choice on their approval of parties' past performance in government, their voting links up with the accountability function. If voters base their choice on their appraisal of parties' promises for the future, their voting is consistent with the mandate function. If voters have other reasons to vote for a particular party, their voting is not straightforwardly consistent with either function.

The level of turnout affects the functioning of elections as instruments of democracy if it correlates with the degree to which voters' reasons to vote as they do are of the kind just identified. If high turnout would imply that many voters cast their vote on the basis of considerations that are not consistent with the functions of elections, this would imply that high turnout has a diminishing effect. So to what extent the level of turnout affects the functioning of elections can be examined by determining the degree to which voters' choices are consistent with the function of elections, and analysing whether differences exist between voters who tend more strongly to participate in elections and voters who tend less strongly to participate. If such differences exist, the level of turnout presumably influences the extent to which the function of elections is properly performed. This follows from the assumption that if turnout is low, particular groups of voters (those generally less inclined to go to the polls) are the first to abstain; if, on the other hand, turnout is high, all kinds of voters show up in about equal numbers.

This article tests whether levels of turnout indeed have an effect on the extent to which the functions of elections are properly performed. First, voters will be classified in terms of the strength of their tendency to participate in elections. This is done on the basis of an analysis of factors that influence the likelihood that voters go to the polls. Next, an examination will be made of the extent to which voters' electoral choices

are consistent with the accountability function of elections, as well as their mandate function. The article then proceeds by focusing on the counterfactual: what would be the consequence of changes (upward or downward) in the level of turnout? On the basis of these analyses conclusions are drawn with respect to the effect that the level of turnout has on the functioning of elections as instruments of democracy.

The basis for analysis is the European Election Study 1999.¹ Focusing on European parliamentary elections, instead of national parliamentary elections, has several advantages. One significant advantage is that the distribution of voting versus abstention is much less skewed than in national elections. In national elections, large majorities of voters tend to go to the polls, but the number of voters and non-voters is more balanced in European elections. In the 1999 European election, average turnout equalled 52 per cent across the 15 member states. Another advantage is that focusing on European elections allows for inclusion in the analysis of a variety of different political systems. Furthermore, turnout varied substantially across these systems: in some countries about nine out of ten voters went to the polls, whereas in other countries voters were strongly outnumbered by non-voters. Hence, the European Election Study 1999 provides an excellent site for analysing voting versus abstention under rather different levels of turnout. A final reason making this study appropriate is simply that the survey included questions necessary for the kind of analysis performed.

2. Voting and abstention in the 1999 European parliamentary elections

European parliamentary elections have been held every five years since 1979. Turnout was certainly not uniform across countries on any occasion and the 1999 European elections were no exception. Expressed as the percentage of valid votes, turnout varied between 24 per cent in the United Kingdom and 86 per cent in Luxembourg (see Fig. 1). So turnout clearly differed much across the member states.

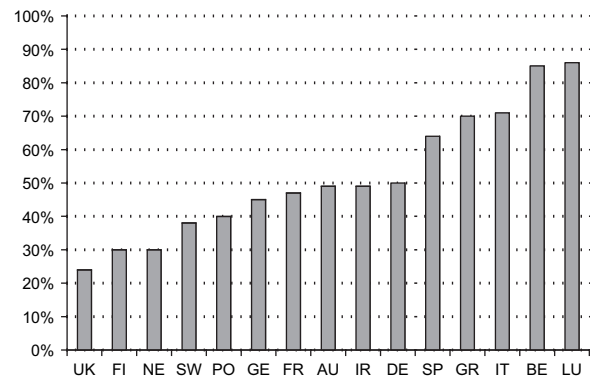


Fig. 1. Turnout in the 1999 European Parliamentary Election for each member state. *Notes:* Names of countries are abbreviated as follows: Austria (AU), Belgium (BE), Denmark (DE), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (GE), Greece (GR), Italy (IT), Ireland (IR), Luxembourg (LU), The Netherlands (NE), Portugal (PO), Spain (SP), Sweden (SW), United Kingdom (UK). *Source:* European Election Study 1999.

What is relevant here is not whether a particular country witnessed high turnout or low turnout, but what factors account for individual differences. To explain why some people voted and others abstained, two kinds of characteristics are important: characteristics of the voter and characteristics of the political system (Anduiza Perea, 2002). This distinction nicely reflects the proposition of the psychologist Lewin (1951) that behaviour is a function of the person and his environment. Voter characteristics may in turn be distinguished into social characteristics and psychological characteristics, while the latter can be divided further into EU-specific and more general political attitudes.

Various studies have focused on the impact of voter characteristics on voting versus abstention (see Lutz and Marsh, 2007). Blais (2000), for example, examined the impact of eleven social characteristics in nine countries across the globe. He found level of education and age to have the largest impact, while religiosity came third. Topf (1995) focused on Western Europe and examined the impact of three social characteristics across four decades. He concluded that neither level of education nor gender had much impact on electoral participation, but that age had a significant effect. Other studies also identified age as an important factor (Blondel et al., 1998; Oppenhuis, 1995). Oppenhuis (1995) additionally identified two psychological characteristics that affected turnout in the 1989 European Parliament elections relatively strongly: interest in politics and strength of party attachment. Unsurprisingly, voters who showed more interest in politics and voters who

¹ These data are distributed by Data Archiving and Network Services (The Hague, The Netherlands) and associated data archives. The data were originally collected for the European Election Study Workgroup. Fieldwork was carried out by a consortium of European survey organisations, co-ordinated by IPSOS (Hamburg, Germany). For more information on this project, refer to Van der Eijk et al. (2002). Neither the original collectors of the data nor their sponsors bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations in this article.

felt more strongly attached to a political party, were more likely to go to the polls. Whereas Oppenhuis found no significant effects of attitudes towards the European Union, Blondel et al. (1998) observed that voters with pro-European attitudes were more likely to vote in European elections.

The second set of characteristics that may play a role concerns the political system. Blais (2000) identified a variety of system characteristics that contribute to differences in turnout across nations, such as the presence or absence of compulsory voting, voting age, the electoral system, and the number of parties. In the European context, Oppenhuis (1995) identified four system characteristics that influence electoral participation: compulsory voting, Sunday voting, concurrent national elections, and proportionality of the electoral system. Blondel et al. (1998) also found an effect of compulsory voting and Sunday voting, but no effect of concurrent national elections or proportionality of the electoral system.

In order to examine whether these voter characteristics and system characteristics affected the chance that voters went to the polls in the 1999 European Election, logistic regression analyses have been performed (Table 1).² Three models have been formulated. In each model the dependent variable indicates whether or not respondents cast a vote (according to their own report). In model 1 the independent variables concern voters' social and political characteristics; model 2 additionally includes variables concerning voters' attitudes towards the European Union; and model 3 additionally includes variables for effects of the political system. The third model does not include interaction effects, so effects of voter characteristics are assumed to be uniform across countries. An alternative approach (in which effects are assumed to be country-specific) is of course possible (see Anduiza Perea, 2002), but this option is discarded because such models are clearly less parsimonious.

The social characteristics included in model 1 are four usual suspects: age, gender, education, and religiosity. Political characteristics are operationalised on the basis of four scores that indicate political interest, political efficacy, political knowledge, and party

attachment. In order to enhance comparability of the regression coefficients, variables have been recoded into a format with values ranging between 0 and 1.³ Two social characteristics — age and religiosity — had the expected effect. Older people were more likely to vote than younger people, and those attending church more often were also more likely to attend the polls. Gender and education did not have a significant effect. Furthermore, each political characteristic influenced voters' chance of casting a ballot. As expected, political interest, political knowledge, political efficacy, and party attachment were all positively related to electoral participation.⁴ On the basis of the first model 67 per cent of the voters could be classified correctly as having voted or not. This may appear an acceptable result, but one should bear in mind that a fairly similar proportion of sampled voters reported having voted. A more useful indicator of the explanatory power of the model, therefore, is the explained variance (as indicated by Nagelkerke R^2). This amounted to 11 per cent, which means that although age, religiosity, and the four political attitudes played a role, other factors were at least as important.

³ Age has been operationalised as years divided by 100, and education as the age at which individuals' education stopped; gender is operationalised as a dummy variable (0 = male; 1 = female). Religiosity is operationalised on the basis of a variable indicating church attendance; the variable indicating church attendance for Italian respondents (seven-point scale) has been transformed into a similar format as that of respondents from other countries (five-point scale) by merging the third and fourth categories and assigning the value of 3.5 to the fifth category. Variables indicating political characteristics correspond with the (average) scores on the following variables: VAR078 (political interest), VAR099 (political knowledge), VAR155 to VAR158 (political efficacy), and VAR080 (party attachment). The variables have been linearly transformed into a 0–1 format, where 0 corresponds to the lowest level of religiosity/interest/knowledge/efficacy/attachment, and 1 corresponds to the highest level. Missing values have been replaced by the median value. This procedure ensures that all cases are included and thus prevents the situation in which the analyses are based on a relatively small subset of the total sample.

⁴ The political interest score combines a question on interest in the election campaign of the European elections with a question on interest in politics (asked after a series of questions on European issues). In principle, it is possible that the resulting measure taps interest in European politics, instead of interest in politics in general. The effect of political interest on voting could then be limited to European elections. To examine whether this was the case, a logistic regression analysis has been performed with voting in the last general election as dependent variable. The results indicated that the effect of political interest was fairly similar to that concerning voting in the European election. This suggests that the political interest measure concerns political interest in general and the effect of political interest is not limited to European elections.

² The analyses are based on weighted data (using variable VAR007). The weighting procedure applied 'generates a turnout and distribution of party choice that is identical to the actual results of the June 1999 European elections in the respective countries [and ensures] that the effective number of cases is equal for each of the systems' (Van der Eijk et al., 2002, p. 44). This procedure is considered useful 'when one is interested in the effects of systemic or contextual factors in a pooled analysis' (p. 44). (See appendix 1 of the official documentation of the European Election Study 1999.)

Table 1
Explaining individual-level turnout: results of logistic regression analysis

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
<i>Social characteristics</i>						
Age	1.16***	0.12	1.29***	0.12	2.02***	0.15
Gender	-0.03	0.04	0.00	0.04	0.10*	0.05
Education	0.31	0.33	0.23	0.33	1.08**	0.40
Religiosity	0.73***	0.07	0.70***	0.07	0.67***	0.09
<i>Political characteristics</i>						
Political interest	0.64***	0.05	0.62***	0.05	1.01***	0.07
Political knowledge	0.28***	0.04	0.24***	0.04	0.63***	0.05
Political efficacy	0.61***	0.11	0.50***	0.11	1.57***	0.13
Party attachment	1.03***	0.07	1.00***	0.07	0.88***	0.08
<i>EU-attitudes</i>						
Attitude membership			0.31***	0.06	0.19**	0.07
Attitude unification			0.43***	0.08	0.06	0.08
<i>System variables</i>						
Belgium – Flanders					3.93***	0.20
Belgium – Wallonie					3.42***	0.18
Britain					-1.02***	0.11
Denmark					-0.07	0.11
Finland					-0.59***	0.11
France					0.75***	0.12
Germany					-0.09	0.11
Greece					1.97***	0.15
Ireland					0.20	0.11
Italy					1.93***	0.14
Luxembourg					2.66***	0.18
Netherlands					-0.94***	0.12
Portugal					-0.03	0.11
Spain					1.61***	0.13
Sweden					-0.42***	0.11
Constant	-1.08***	0.10	-1.48***	0.11	-3.11***	0.16
% Correct predictions	66.8		67.0		77.4	
Nagelkerke R^2	0.11		0.12		0.42	

Notes: Variables have been recoded into scores that vary between 0 and 1 to enhance comparability of the coefficients. Age is operationalised as years divided by 100; gender is a dummy variable (0 = male, 1 = female); education is operationalised as age at which education stopped. Model 3 includes a dummy variable for each country except the reference category (Austria). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

In order to examine the extent to which electoral participation depended on voters' attitudes about the EU, model 2 additionally includes two variables. These concern whether voters considered membership of the EU a good thing or a bad thing, and whether they felt European unification had gone too far or should be pushed further. The findings show that both attitudes played a role: those who considered EU membership a good thing and those who thought European unification should be pushed further were more likely to vote. The size of the impact of these variables, however, was limited. If these opinions about the EU are taken into account, the explained variance increases only marginally. Apparently, the probability that voters would go

to the polls in the European election did not depend strongly on their attitudes about the EU.

To examine whether characteristics of the political system played a role, model 3 combines the social and political characteristics (model 1) and attitudes towards the EU (model 2) with dummy variables for each country (except Austria, which is the reference category). This procedure, which is similar to that employed by Blais (2000, p. 53), allows us to control for all system characteristics simultaneously in a simple way. The explanatory power of the third model clearly exceeds that of the previous two: the number of voters who could be classified correctly as having voted or not amounted to 77 per cent and the explained variance (as indicated by

Nagelkerke R^2) increased to 42 per cent. This suggests that electoral participation was strongly influenced by system characteristics.

What is more important in this context, however, is whether the effects of voters' social and political characteristics remain significant when system characteristics are controlled. The general pattern is that they do. In model 3, age, religiosity, and each of the four political characteristics had a significant impact on voting versus abstention. Moreover, once the system variables are added to the model, effects of gender and education also become significant predictors of electoral participation. The effect of EU-specific attitudes, on the other hand, diminishes. The effect of attitudes towards EU membership is smaller but significant, while the effect of attitudes towards unification is no longer significant.

On the basis of the coefficients of model 3, which indicate the effect of the independent variables discussed, the probability voting of in the 1999 European election can be determined for each voter. These probabilities can be conceived of as the product of three components: (1) a general tendency to vote or abstain in elections, resulting from the combined effects of social and political characteristics, (2) an effect on voting in *European* elections, resulting from EU-specific attitudes, and (3) an effect of the political system (and other country characteristics), which is captured by the system variables. Because we are interested in the first component, the coefficients in model 3 that concern the effects of social and political characteristics are of particular interest. These coefficients can be used to determine to what extent voters have a general tendency to vote or abstain in elections, excluding effects of characteristics of the political system and effects of EU-specific attitudes.

Fig. 2 shows the number of voters who were thus assigned a particular probability of voting; the probabilities have been rounded off to the nearest multiple of five. The figure illustrates that considerable differences exist among voters regarding their tendency to vote: some have a very weak tendency to vote, whereas others have a rather strong tendency to vote.

3. Voting and the functioning of elections

3.1. The accountability function

The accountability function of elections is central in the work of, among others, Key (1966). He argued that 'the only really effective weapon of popular control in a democratic regime is the capacity of the electorate to throw a party from power' (p. 76) and that the

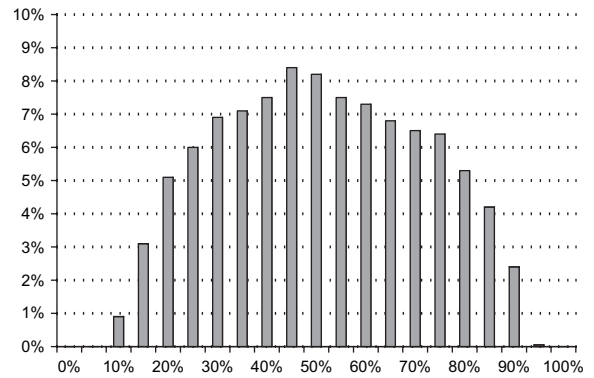


Fig. 2. Percentage of voters with a particular predicted probability of voting.

electorate 'commands prospectively only insofar as it expresses either approval or disapproval of that which has happened before' (p. 61). Hence, voters base their choices at the polls on their experiences during the latest period of government (Key, 1966, pp. 9, 58). The notions of reward and punishment provide the link to vote choice: if voters are satisfied with incumbents, they *reward* them with a vote; if they are dissatisfied, they *punish* them with a vote for the opposition. This simple decision rule may be referred to as the *incumbent approval heuristic* (Rosema, 2006). Various other scholars have emphasised the importance of retrospective evaluations and included incumbent approval in their models (see, for example, Fiorina, 1981; Sniderman et al., 1991, chap. 9).

To what extent voters' choices were in accordance with the incumbent approval heuristic, can be tested on the basis of the 1999 European Election Study. The survey included a question that asked voters whether they approved or disapproved of the national government's record to date. Furthermore, the survey contained two useful questions about electoral choice. One question asked respondents which party they voted for in the European Parliament elections, while another asked which party respondents would vote for if there were national parliamentary elections tomorrow. If voters use European elections to express their approval or disapproval of incumbent national governments, in line with the notion of European elections as second-order national elections (cf. Reif and Schmitt, 1980), the first question might be used. However, what really matters, one might argue, is how people vote in national elections. After all, those are the elections in which the government's political power is at stake. Therefore, the question on how respondents would vote if a national election was held at that time may also be used. An

additional advantage of this question is that a larger number of voters reported a choice: 63 per cent reported a vote in the European election, while 73 per cent reported a voting intention for the national election. This alternative question is included in the analysis in order to determine whether voting behaviour in European elections is similar to voting behaviour in national elections – in particular concerning the weight of approval of the national government in relation to vote choice.

Table 2 shows the percentage of voters approving the government's record in each of the 15 member states of the European Union. On average, 54 per cent of the voters approved of their government's record and 46 per cent disapproved. Across the countries the approval figures varied considerably, namely between 31 per cent (Germany) and 88 per cent (Luxembourg). In five countries only a minority of voters approved of the government's record, and hence a majority disapproved. In 10 countries a majority approved of the government's record.

Table 2 also shows for each member state how many voters cast their European vote in line with the incumbent approval heuristic. These figures combine two categories of voters: those who approved of the government and voted for a government party, and those who disapproved of the government and voted for an opposition party.⁵ The two remaining groups (voters who approved of the government but voted for an opposition party, and voters who disapproved of the government but nevertheless voted for a government party) did not vote in accordance with the incumbent approval heuristic. On average, a majority of 66 per cent of the voters fitted the pattern that corresponds to the incumbent approval heuristic. Although some differences can be observed across countries, most figures do not deviate much from the European average. The only two countries in which the figure deviated by more than 10 per cent are Greece, where as much as 80 per cent of the voters cast their vote in line with the incumbent approval heuristic, and Ireland, where only 51 per cent did.

Finally, Table 2 shows that if we shift our attention to vote intentions concerning national elections, the figures are fairly similar to those concerning the European elections. The average percentage of voters who

preferred to vote in line with the incumbent approval heuristic in national elections equalled 68 per cent. This suggests that incumbent approval plays a similar role in European parliamentary elections as in national parliamentary elections.

3.2. *The mandate function*

The mandate function of elections is central in the work of, among others, Downs (1957). Downs regarded selection of government the sole purpose of elections and assumed that voters act rationally, that is, seek to maximise benefits. These benefits are defined in terms of the utility voters receive from government activity. According to the model, voters cast their votes for the party they believe will provide the highest utility income, which is defined in terms of policy outcomes. To judge what parties will do in the next election period, voters evaluate what they have done in the most recent one. For the governing party the evaluation is based on what it has done while it was in power. For an opposition party it is based on what voters think it would have done if it had been in power. The decision-making process starts with gathering information and ends with a vote choice. In between, voters take three steps: (1) evaluate each policy adopted by a party, (2) transform these single evaluations into an overall evaluation for each party, and (3) compare the overall evaluations of the competing parties to make a vote choice.

A major problem of this model, Downs argued, is an assumption that will never be met in practice: 'in the real world, uncertainty and lack of information prevent even the most intelligent and well-informed voter from behaving in precisely the fashion we have described' (pp. 45–46). To meet these limitations, Downs modified the model in a number of ways. The most important modification was the introduction of the concept of ideology. Downs argued that it is rational for parties to adopt ideologies and to be consistent in these across time. For voters it may be rational to use ideology as a short cut, because they cannot become fully informed about all policies. The notion of ideology laid the foundation for an analysis of party platforms in terms of a left–right continuum. Downs assumed that parties take stands on many issues, which can be plotted on the left–right dimension. The parties' net position would correspond with a weighted average of all its issue positions. Voters are assumed to vote for the party that is closest to them in this one-dimensional political space. This idea is commonly known as the *smallest distance hypothesis*.

⁵ Political parties have been classified as government party or opposition party on the basis of data provided in the data yearbook of the *European Journal of Political Research* (Koole and Katz, 2000). Parties that were represented in the cabinet of that time are classified as government party; all other parties are classified as opposition party.

Table 2

Percentage of voters who approved of the government's record and percentage of voters whose vote choice was in line with the incumbent approval heuristic

	AU	BE	DE	FI	FR	GE	GR	IR	IT	LU	NE	PO	SP	SW	UK	Mean
Approved of government	54	38	52	70	60	31	41	69	41	88	63	61	70	39	58	54
European vote in line with incumbent approval heuristic	64	71	56	68	63	68	80	51	68	61	60	75	69	64	62	66
National vote in line with incumbent approval heuristic	67	73	62	66	65	69	84	53	72	61	59	79	75	68	69	68

The extent to which voters' choices are in line with the smallest distance hypothesis, can be tested on the basis of the 1999 European Election Study. The survey included questions that asked respondents to indicate their own views as well as the positions of several parties in terms of a 10-point scale whose end-points were labelled 'left' and 'right'. The (absolute) difference between the score voters assigned themselves and the score they assigned to a particular party, indicates the perceived ideological agreement (or better: disagreement) with that party. If voters (intended to) cast their ballot for a party that was closest to them on the left–right scale, their choice is in accordance with the smallest distance hypothesis.

Table 3 shows the mean position that voters assigned themselves in terms of the left–right continuum. The mean position of voters equalled 5.4, which is virtually identical to the imaginary mid-point of the 10-point scale (5.5). Although differences can be observed across countries, these are rather limited in magnitude: the mean varied between 4.9 (Spain) and 5.9 (Finland, Greece).

Table 3 also shows that to what extent voters' choices in the European elections were in line with the smallest distance hypothesis.⁶ On average, 62 per cent intended to vote as expected on the basis of Downs' model. Across the countries this figure varied between 47 per cent (Ireland) and 85 per cent (Portugal). Figures concerning vote preferences in national elections are similar to those concerning the European elections: in national elections, too, on average 62 per cent of the voters would cast their ballot in line with the smallest distance hypothesis. This suggests that perceived ideological agreement, like incumbent approval, plays a similar role in European and national parliamentary elections.

⁶ Voters who intended to vote for a party that the survey did not ask them to rate in terms of the left–right scale, have been excluded from the analysis.

4. The impact of turnout on the functioning of elections

Figures concerning the incumbent approval heuristic and the smallest distance hypothesis presented so far have not taken into account different levels of turnout. The figures presented indicate how voting links up with the functions of election under the actual turnout in the 1999 European parliamentary elections (66 per cent in the sample analysed), as well as under the hypothetical turnout of 73 per cent (average across 15 member states) for 'national parliamentary elections to be held tomorrow'. In this section we shift our focus to hypothetical situations: what would happen if turnout were to be considerably higher or considerably lower? This is explored by distinguishing five scenarios, which correspond to five different levels of turnout: an overall turnout of 90 per cent, 70 per cent, 50 per cent, 30 per cent, and 10 per cent; for simplicity's sake these levels are referred to as very high, high, medium, low, and very low turnout. Furthermore, in this section we only focus on the European electorate as a whole, thus leaving aside – and in as far as possible trying to eliminate from the analysis – country-specific effects.

The chance that a particular individual would vote in an election in which the overall turnout is of a certain magnitude can be determined by combining the coefficients upon which the tendency to vote figures presented in Fig. 2 are based (which reflect the joint effect of the various social and political characteristics listed in Table 1) with an adjusted constant. In other words, by leaving out the effects of EU-specific attitudes and system variables and adjusting the constant, model 3 can be modified such that the average predicted probability that individuals will vote matches the level of turnout we are interested in. So, in order to examine the effect of a rise in overall turnout to 90 per cent, for example, the constant has to be adjusted such that the average predicted probability of each individual to cast a vote also equals 90 per cent.

Table 3

Mean left–right position of voters and percentage of voters whose vote choice was in line with the smallest distance hypothesis

	AU	BE	DE	FI	FR	GE	GR	IR	IT	LU	NE	PO	SP	SW	UK	Mean
Mean left–right position	5.3	5.4	5.7	5.9	5.0	5.0	5.9	5.6	5.2	5.4	5.4	5.3	4.9	5.2	5.1	5.4
European vote in line with smallest distance hypothesis	59	68	50	50	57	59	61	47	61	58	58	85	72	59	62	62
National vote in line with smallest distance hypothesis	57	68	55	62	59	54	64	47	64	58	56	87	71	63	58	62

The next step involves examining the effects of different levels of turnout. The traditional argument is that low turnout means that working class voters are under-represented at the polls (Lijphart, 1997). A first aspect to be analysed is whether the level of turnout indeed affects the social composition of the electorate. In addition to the social class cleavage, two other cleavages examined are the divisions between secular and religious voters and between rural and urban voters. If low levels of turnout appear to result in under-representation of certain groups at the polls, this may be interpreted as support for hypothesis that low turnout is a threat to democracy. Note that this line of reasoning is valid only to the extent that one views elections as instruments of representation and considers the cleavages focused on of primary importance. If one regards the key function of elections to be accountability and mandate (cf. Powell, 2000), the key factors are the proportion of voters who approve of the government record as well as their mean position on the left–right continuum. The hypothesis that low turnout is a threat to democracy would be supported if low turnout is associated with a different level of government approval and with a different mean position on the left–right continuum than is high turnout. The hypothesis that low turnout should be considered a blessing in disguise, on the other hand, would be supported if low turnout is associated with larger proportions of the electorate voting in line with the incumbent approval heuristic and the smallest distance hypothesis. After all, elections would then better serve the accountability and mandate function.

There is one problem that has to be solved before the analyses can be carried out. This is that not all individuals expressed a vote preference: in the European parliamentary elections many people did not vote; and asked how they would vote if a national parliamentary election would be held tomorrow, many said they did not know. In order to explore the counterfactual (in particular scenarios with very high turnout), it is necessary to make assumptions about how these people would vote if they were to go to the polls. If undecided voters and non-voters would be indifferent between the competing parties, making assumptions about hypothetical

voting behaviour would be rather odd. However, such voters are usually not indifferent. They like certain parties more than others, and consequently they are more likely to vote for some parties than for others (see Pettersen and Rose, 2007). These differences are also reflected in answers to the so-called ‘probability to vote’ question, which has been employed in national as well as European electoral research (Tillie, 1995; Van der Eijk et al., 1996). Here, the question of which party non-voters would vote for in a particular scenario will be answered by making another assumption: that if they did vote they would decide who to vote for *in ways similar to those who had the same general tendency to vote*. So in order to examine whether voters with *different* tendencies to vote act differently, it is assumed that voters with *similar* tendencies to vote decide similarly.

Let us now turn to the effects of the level of turnout on the three aspects discussed above: (1) the social composition of the participating electorate, (2) the incumbent approval and ideological position, and (3) the use of the incumbent approval heuristic and smallest distance hypothesis. The effects of the level of turnout are estimated by repeating the analyses presented in Tables 2 and 3 for the European vote, but this time taking into account changes in the composition of the participating electorate. This has been done by weighting the data such that each respondent’s weight equals the person’s estimated probability of voting in relation to that particular level of turnout. In practice this means that if turnout is very high, all respondents are weighted fairly similarly; if turnout is very low, on the other hand, respondents who have a strong tendency to vote are given more weight than respondents who have a weak tendency to vote, thus reflecting the differences in the chance that they will vote in such an election.

Table 4 shows the effects of different levels of turnout on the proportion of working class voters, the proportion of religious voters, and the proportion of rural voters. Regarding the class cleavage the pattern is as expected: low turnout means that working class voters make up a smaller proportion of the participating electorate than if turnout is high. The differences, however,

Table 4
Effect of level of turnout on social composition of the participating electorate (EU average)

Level of turnout	Percentage of working class voters	Percentage of religious voters	Percentage of rural voters
90 per cent	25	49	39
70 per cent	24	51	39
50 per cent	24	53	39
30 per cent	23	55	39
10 per cent	22	58	39

are rather small. If the overall turnout were to drop from 90 per cent to 10 per cent, the proportion of working class voters at the polls would fall by only 3 percentage points. These findings thus provide no support for the hypothesis that those who are economically worse off will be poorly represented when turnout is low. The differences are considerably larger with respect to the cleavage that divides secular voters from religious voters: the difference between very high turnout and very low turnout in terms of the proportion of religious voters is 9 percentage points.⁷ This means that if turnout is low, secular voters turn up in relatively small numbers. Finally, the figures in Table 4 indicate that the level of turnout has no impact on the number of rural voters that participate.

The next question is whether the level of turnout affects the percentage of voters approving of the government record. Table 5 shows that it does, but only to a very limited extent. The pattern for the whole EU is that those approving of the government record would constitute a slightly larger part of the participating electorate if turnout were to be very low than they would if turnout were to be very high: the difference equals 3 percentage points. So low turnout means neither that those who are enthusiastic about the government show up in relatively large numbers, nor that those who are more sceptical about the government do. Table 5 also shows that the mean position on the left–right continuum is virtually unaffected. So the findings provide no support for the hypothesis that low turnout means that left-wing voters stay home.

The final matter to be discussed is the impact of the level of turnout on the extent to which elections serve their accountability and mandate function. The blessing in disguise hypothesis builds on the idea that if turnout is low, those who participate more often base their vote

⁷ Voters are classified as religious if they said they considered themselves as belonging to a particular religion and if they attended religious services at least a few times a year.

Table 5
Effect of level of turnout on incumbent approval and ideological position of voters (EU average)

Level of turnout	Percentage of approving of government record	Mean position on left–right continuum
90 per cent	55	5.4
70 per cent	55	5.4
50 per cent	56	5.4
30 per cent	57	5.4
10 per cent	58	5.5

choice on the incumbent approval heuristic and the smallest distance hypothesis. Table 6 shows that the pattern is indeed as expected on the basis of this hypothesis. If turnout is very low, the proportion of voters voting in line with the incumbent approval heuristic or the smallest distance hypothesis is larger than if turnout is very high. However, the differences are of a very limited magnitude and neither exceeds 3 per cent. This means that those who are less likely to go to the polls do not decide how to vote in very different ways than those who are very likely to participate in elections. Consequently, the level of turnout does not strongly affect the extent to which the behaviour of those who vote links up with the accountability and mandate function of elections.

5. Conclusion: low turnout, does it matter?

Whether low turnout is a threat to democracy, as some political scientists argue (Lijphart, 1997), depends on differences between those who participate and those who do not. Concerns about low turnout are usually based on the assumption that non-voters differ from voters in terms of their political interests. If such differences exist and turnout is low, the interests of some citizens are taken into account in policymaking more strongly than the interests of others. This is clearly at odds with the widely accepted normative view that all citizens should have equal influence (Dahl, 1989).

Table 6
Effect of level of turnout on use of incumbent approval heuristic and smallest distance hypothesis by voters (EU average)

Level of turnout	Percentage of voting in line with incumbent approval heuristic	Percentage of voting in line with smallest distance hypothesis
90 per cent	67	62
70 per cent	67	63
50 per cent	68	63
30 per cent	68	64
10 per cent	69	65

The potential threat to the realisation of democratic values merits empirical research on possible negative consequences of low turnout. But it is important to acknowledge that potential disadvantages of low turnout are only one side of the coin. The other side is that low turnout may also have positive consequences. The reason again lies in potential differences between those who participate and those who do not. Citizens may differ not only in terms of political interests, but also in terms of the kind of considerations upon which they (would) base their vote choice. It may well be that some citizens follow politics closely and base their electoral preferences on considerations concerning governments' past performance and political parties' future plans, whereas other citizens follow politics less closely and choose on the basis of other considerations — for example, political leaders' rhetoric skills and physical appearance. If the latter voters would abstain, should this be considered problematic? On the contrary, one might argue.

Following this line of reasoning the consequences of low turnout may be approached in another way, namely in terms of the extent to which two key functions of elections are properly performed: the mandate function and the accountability function (cf. Powell, 2000). If voters' choices are based on their approval of the incumbent government (incumbent approval heuristic), these are consistent with the accountability function. If voters' choices are based on perceived ideological agreement (smallest distance hypothesis), which may be regarded as a key to future policies, these are consistent with the mandate function. If voters base their choice on other considerations — say, the blue eyes or nice bum of a party leader — these are not consistent with either function. From the perspective of elections as instruments of democracy, abstention of such voters might well be considered desirable. If voters who base their choice on considerations that are not consistent with the functions of elections are more likely to abstain than other voters, low turnout could in fact be considered a good thing. Low turnout, then, is a blessing in disguise.

Analyses concerning voters' electoral preferences in the 15 member states of the European Union in 1999 show that because voters have different tendencies to go to the polls, different levels of turnout have political consequences. In elections in which turnout is low certain groups of voters are 'under-represented', whereas others are 'over-represented'. Although working class voters have often been first mentioned in this respect, the analysis shows that the effect is three times as large for religious versus secular voters. Hence, there is more

reason to worry that the moral values of secular citizens are given too little weight if turnout is low, than to worry about the poor representation of citizens who are economically less off. Even the effect of religion, however, is of a limited magnitude. The findings furthermore show that if turnout is low, those who approve of the government attend the polls slightly more often than those who disapprove, thus providing incumbent parties a slight advantage. So in low-turnout elections government parties that receive support from only a minority of the population run the risk of receiving majority support at the polls. These effects, too, are rather limited (they are for sure much smaller than disproportionality that results from a majoritarian electoral system). Therefore, these findings do not warrant the conclusion that low turnout is a serious threat to democracy.

The contrasting view that low turnout is a blessing in disguise was not provided with much support either. This is not to say the effects hypothesised were not observed. If turnout is low, those who participate vote in line with the incumbent approval heuristic and the smallest distance hypothesis more often. Once again, however, the differences are rather limited. This means that even those least likely to participate in elections, formulate electoral preferences in accordance with their approval of the incumbent government and in line with perceived ideological differences fairly often. The accountability and mandate function of elections are therefore served by their behaviour about as well as by those who have a strong tendency to vote. Apparently, not only does low turnout not matter because the election outcomes would not be much different, as several scholars have argued, it also does not matter if one focuses on the extent to which motivations to vote in a certain way are consistent with the democratic functions of elections.

As a final note, let me briefly reflect on future research. The analyses presented are based on estimates of how strongly individuals tend to go to the polls. These estimates might certainly be improved. One could conclude that political scientists have not yet identified the underlying factors that influence electoral participation and that future research should do just that. The issue of low turnout could next be re-examined along the same lines as in this article. Another interpretation, however, would be that abstention occurs rather randomly. This is exactly why low turnout appears not to matter much: with respect to key factors, those who vote fairly well represent the electorate as a whole. Another conclusion is at least as important for the direction of future research. The analyses indicate that negative consequences of low turnout, which are of a limited

magnitude, are counterbalanced by mostly overlooked positive consequences. This means that there is no reason to make more fuss about the claimed disadvantages of low turnout than about its blessings. If, despite the lack of evidence for disadvantages (a lack that pervades this entire issue), one should still insist on continuing to look for such disadvantages, then intellectual honesty would demand an equal effort in looking for the blessings.

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