

# THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPIRICAL ELECTION RESEARCH FOR UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE CITIZEN IN A MODERN DEMOCRACY

Brian J. Gaines

Department of Political Science and Institute of Government & Public Affairs  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Paper prepared for Responsible Citizenship, Education, and the Constitution  
The Center for Civic Education and Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung  
Freiburg, September 11-16, 2005

---

## ABSTRACT

Too often, a gulf separates academic political science and popular commentary on politics by journalists, practitioners, and interested citizens. Both scholars and pundits are keenly interested in what is required of citizens by democracies, and whether the public is informed and interested enough to play its part. Academic research can seem narrow or irrelevant as a consequence of a scientific, hypothesis-testing mindset and a concomitant tendency for questions to be narrowly defined and conclusions heavily qualified. Yet, quantitative academic work on elections should be of interest not only to the small community of professional psephologists, but to the broad citizenry. To build that case, I discuss scholarly work on voter turnout and, very briefly, anti-incumbent swings in “moderating elections” as examples where research on American and German elections demonstrates useful complementarities for number crunchers and newshounds.

---

## INTRODUCTION

What do democracies require of their citizens? For many, the answer begins, “At minimum, voting.” Hence, low turnout in free elections is frequently taken to be a sign that something is rotten in the state. In this short paper, I will survey how academic work on turnout has progressed, partly with the goal of suggesting that this popular view that turnout levels are a straight-forward indicator of democratic health is mistaken. I focus mostly on the U.S., but also bring in the example of Germany. To conclude, I will briefly raise some point about a related, important topic: to what extent are citizens able to control their governments by using multiple voting opportunities to signal displeasure with incumbents, and to limit their power? The evidence is mixed, but there are some

grounds for thinking that electorates, taken as a whole, are shrewd users of the constitutional tools at their disposal. However, academic work on this point has not really produced a consensus, and empirically oriented scholars probably need more help from journalists, pundits, and practitioners, those whose work is less formal and quantitative, but whose grasp of the elusive public opinion pulse is stronger.

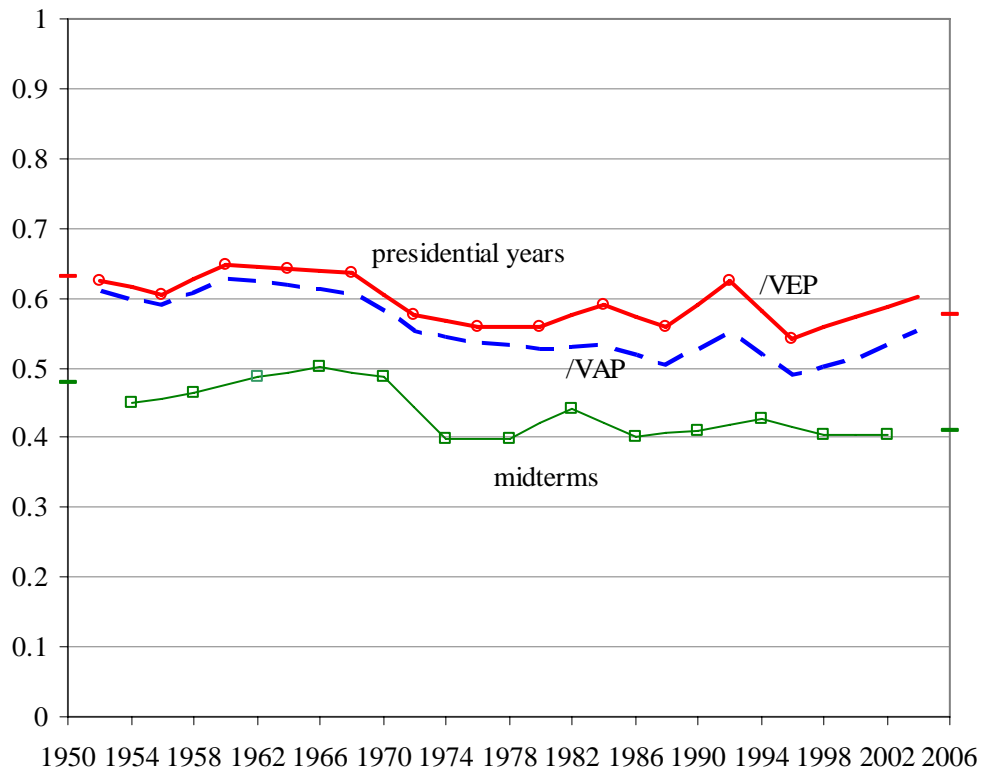
## TURNOUT

Voter turnout has been a staple of quantitative academic research for decades. A number of closely related questions are bundled together. How many people vote? Who votes? How and why do turnout levels change over time, and regions differ in turnout? Why do people vote? Only the first of these questions is relatively straight-forward to answer directly from official election returns, without doing any statistical analysis. Historical returns at the sub-national level provide important clues about most of the other questions, but opinion surveys have become the main research device for addressing the most difficult questions about decisions to vote (or not). Academic studies have addressed every facet of turnout, and have made some progress, though they have by no means resolved all the main questions. Some of the strongest findings have made their way into the conventional wisdom of the public at large, but it remains true that the popular press usually deals with turnout descriptively and speculatively, and that some areas of consensus on the scholarly side have not reach wider audiences.

To begin, although it is frequently said that turnout “is falling” or “has been falling for decades” in the US, these claims are incorrect, and not only because they have become out-of date, as turnout rose from 1996 to 2000 and again from 2000 to 2004. A second, less noticed point about the (false) common wisdom is that measuring the national turnout in the US is tricky, partly because individual states are responsible for official vote tabulations, and they use different standards, making the numerator hard to compute. More importantly, various different denominators are used. Registration of eligible American voters is not automatic, and both total registered voters and voting-age population are popular choices for divisor. Converting the voting-age population to the population of legally *eligible* voters, however, requires subtracting off foreign residents and, in most states, convicted felons (who are normally disenfranchised). Figure 1 illustrates the significance of switching to the correct denominator. Rather than a steady decline, American turnout exhibits a step drop, of about 6% points.<sup>1</sup> The timing of the drop corresponds to nation-wide enfranchisement of 18-21-year olds, but is too large to be explained on that basis alone. The gap between years with and without presidential elections is, in any case, much larger than either the post-1960s slip in average rates or the typical year-to-year variation around the average. Clearly, American voters respond to how important or interesting are the offices at stake, and that point raises an important

---

<sup>1</sup> The 5 presidential elections from 1952 to 1968 averaged about 63% turnout, while the 10 elections from 1972 to 2004 averaged about 58%. Likewise, the 1954 through 1970 midterms had an average turnout of about 48%, while their 1974-2002 companions averaged about 41%. These averages are marked with dashes on the left and right vertical axes of Figure 1.



VAP = voting-age population; VEP = eligible population

**Figure 1. US Turnout, 1952-2004**

fact not immediately evident from the figure, that in all of these years, American ballots are nearly always very long by comparative standards. It is not unusual for a voter to face dozens of choices, for national, state, and sometimes local representatives and frequently on referenda as well. The American penchant for making so many offices and issues elective is not new, so it cannot explain the 6% decline, but it surely plays a role (along with placing the onus for registration on the voter himself) in making American turnout low by international standards.

Both of these factors are frequently ignored when commentators lament that American turnout is so low, inferring that this abstention is a symptom of a serious malady in the polity or the populace. Indeed, most non-academic commentators take an alarmist tone in reporting turnout levels in the 40-60% range. When not citing foreign examples of far higher participation, they implicitly treat 100% as the natural baseline of what one should see in an ideal democracy. Scholars borrowing from the “rational choice” literature that has dominated economics, by contrast, take almost the opposite view, turning the question of why so few Americans vote on its head, asking instead, “Why should *anyone* vote?” From the perspective of basic cost-benefit analysis, it is not

rational for any individual to vote in a typical election. Although this idea has not made much of an impact on popular, journalistic discourse, in academics, this puzzle has become central. To understand the conclusion, it is helpful to write down a very simple equation for the “utility” of voting. Utility, in this context, is merely a simplifying device for making comparisons of cost and benefit measured in some unspecified unit of personal satisfaction. The utility for voting ( $U$ ) can be expressed as:

$$U = pB - C$$

where  $B$  designates benefits from one’s preferred candidate winning,  $C$  designates costs of voting, and  $p$  is the probability of one’s vote making a difference. In the absence of poll taxes and bribery,  $B$  and  $C$  do not represent direct monetary costs, of course. Rather, the  $C$  term covers “opportunity costs,” such as time consumed by voting that could have been used for other activities (work or leisure). The actual amount of time consumed by casting a ballot is unlikely to exceed a few hours at most, but most voters also devote time to preparing to vote, by watching debates, attending rallies, reading news stories, pamphlets and the like, discussing issues with colleagues, and so on. Those who are certain that they will not vote can, by contrast, eschew such activity. The simplest notion of benefit, meanwhile, is the pleasure derived from seeing one’s preferred candidate or party triumph. For a small number of individuals, actual employment is at stake; indeed, historically, in the era of patronage, substantial numbers had employment directly tied to election outcomes. For most modern voters, the benefits associated with their preferred candidates winning are indirect, associated with myriad possible policy changes, many of them marginal, subtle, or uncertain actually to be implemented.

The key to the calculation is that benefits associated with outcomes are non-exclusive, *i.e.* that one enjoys the result of a preferred candidate winning or suffers the fate of a preferred candidate losing, regardless of whether or not he or she took part in the election. In turn, the objective probability of one’s vote “making a difference” is, for large electorates and almost all electoral rules, very, very small. In a plurality election, for a vote to matter, it must make or break a tie between the top two candidates, or else there must be some advantage accrued by a winning candidate from increasing the margin of victory. Some commentators do argue that candidates obtain “mandates” by winning overwhelmingly, but hard evidence for such an effect is skimpy. As for ties, given a moderately large voting public (a few thousand or more), each individual’s odds of creating or breaking a tie are very, very tiny, even when polls suggest that an election will be extremely close. In turn, except with equally massive benefits, the  $C$  term will always exceed the  $pB$  term, and voting will never be an action that generates positive utility. Even someone who would be willing to pay \$10,000 for the right unilaterally to choose an election’s winner should not spend the equivalent of \$1 in costs to vote, given a probability of that vote changing the outcome that is less than 1/10,000. Exact calculations of  $p$  depend on a few assumptions about behavior of other voters, but in, say, an American presidential election, it is many orders of magnitude smaller than 1/10,000, more like one in a trillion trillion.

Precisely which ties matter depends on the electoral system. In a list proportional-representation election, for instance, there are many possible relevant ties, one at each threshold for allocating a seat to one party rather than another. The mathematical details aside, however, it remains true in a PR context that any individual voter who is fairly confident that thousands of others will vote in his or her district will have a tiny objective probability of making a difference. The retort that “if everyone thought that way, no one would vote” is correct insofar as it highlights the point that each individual’s calculation of rational action is dependent on behavior of others; however, the point does not undercut the main conclusions. Provided that one can confidently forecast large-scale turnout, casting a decisive vote should not motivate a rational, cost-benefit minded individual to submit a ballot.

One conclusion about this argument is that few real people seem to think in these mathematical terms, and that the “paradox” is thus better described as a “false theory” of voter logic. Substituting a subjective  $p$  for an objective  $p$  can rescue the cost-benefit framework, but only by positing that most people massively over-estimate their own influence. A different take has been to widen the notion of costs and benefits, and, in particular, to propose that there is a kind of benefit from voting that is independent of the outcome. After all, for some people, talking about politics is not a cost or time-stealing nuisance, but a positive pleasure, a benefit in itself. In a broader sense, then, voting might be an enjoyable activity even for those who know the arcane mathematical details about how unlikely are ties, or who appreciate intuitively that an individual’s influence in a large electorate is inherently minuscule. Likewise, some people feel a sense of duty to vote, and regard not taking part in a free election as a shameful negligence. In the same vein, being asked to vote might be enough to tip the cost-benefit balance for those who feel bad about disappointing someone who has made a request of them that they can easily fulfill. Others are motivated less by possible guilt or regret over shirking than by the joy of feeling associated with others in a cause or movement. This sense of solidarity in choosing a side can make voting an expressive activity. In short, a host of psychic costs and benefits probably belong in the equation along with the simpler time and outcome terms, and the most important fact about these benefits is that they do not depend on the probability of a knife-edged result.

Part of the reason that this stark, but surprising theoretical framework has been influential for scholars is that it helps organize empirical work. Some hypotheses about costs can be tested with data comparing jurisdictions according to when they hold elections (weekends or weekdays), how many hours polling stations are open, whether or not early, absentee, or convenience voting options are available, and so on. Of course, differences in the populations in terms of voter traits could also be responsible for variation in turnout, so comparisons of a particular polity before and after an institutional change can be more enlightening than comparisons of different places. One of the scholar’s comparative advantages as against casual observers is some knowledge of the preferred statistical techniques to extract the most information from cross-sectional variance (differences from place to place at a given time) and time-series variance (differences in a given place across time) starting from official returns that constitute a panel data set (repeated observations of a set of units such as countries, states, counties,

or other sub-national regional units). Alas, aggregate data have an inherent weakness. Studies of how turnout levels vary by region, and how regions vary in terms of income, racial composition, and so on, can be bedeviled by the “ecological” inference or cross-level inference problem. As an example, if one finds that turnout is highest where the population is heavily Catholic, it might mean that Catholics are more likely to vote, but it can also mean that non-Catholics living in Catholic areas vote at higher rates than non-Catholics living in less Catholic areas.<sup>2</sup>

In turn, the study of turnout studies remains wed to random-sample surveys. Surveys have their own difficulties, including a marked tendency to exaggerate turnout levels (routinely, some respondents falsely claim to have voted). Meanwhile, the survey-based literature has thrown up a puzzle or two of its own. Some of the most robust predictors of voting, year after year, include age, education, and how easy or difficult it is to vote. Oddly, the 1970s drop in normal turnout occurred (and has not reversed) even while many of the factors that consistently predict voting have increased. The American electorate has become better educated and, as the baby-boom generation has entered middle age, has gotten older. Meanwhile, many barriers to voting have diminished, as states did away with the last vestiges of institutionalized racism such as bogus literacy tests in the 1950s and 60s, and most states have made both registration and voting easier and easier over the last 10-20 years. The implication is that other factors must also be changing, in the opposite direction, of suppressing voter participation.

Here is where the main advantage of the survey comes to light, since a prime candidate is attitudes, which are invisible in official returns and census data. Perhaps surprisingly, and contrary to conventional wisdom, cynicism is not a strong predictor of staying away from the polls. Questions that tap into beliefs about corruption of government and politicians have less predictive power in models of voting than do questions that aim to measure individuals’ sense of efficacy. The distinction is not sharp, because efficacy is often defined to cover both one’s personal sense of influence (internal efficacy) and one’s sense of responsiveness of institutions (external efficacy). Also important are levels of interest in politics, affect for parties, and the extent to which individuals are connected to their communities. Scholars disagree on the relative importance of these factors, but they all seem to matter to some degree. Interestingly, Americans compare favourably to citizens in other mature democracies on most of these attitudinal measures. That is, they are no less close to parties (although they are less likely to be formal members), they report higher levels of interest in politics, and they usually show greater faith in their own ability to effect change. Americans might be less socially connected than, say, most West Europeans, though this point depends on how one measures social ties. Americans move more, and are less likely to belong to professional organizations like unions, but they are far more likely to attend church, which is itself a strong predictor of voting. Indeed, comparative politics specialists have

---

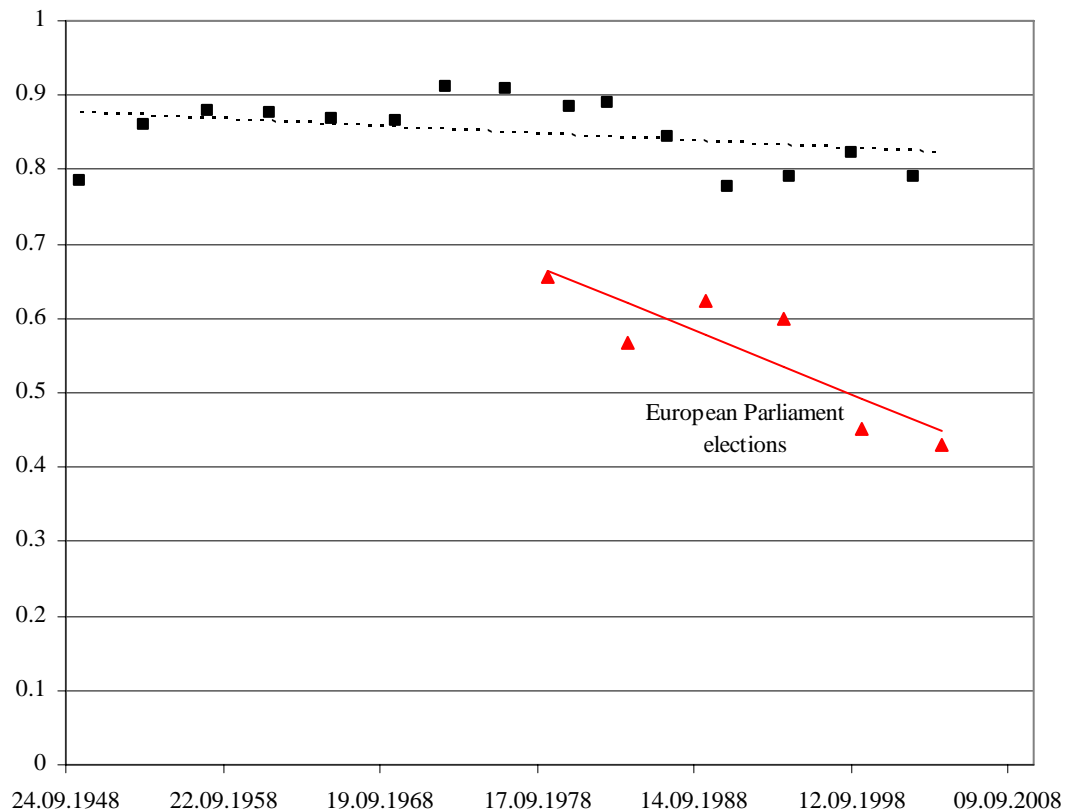
<sup>2</sup> Robinson (1950) memorably demonstrated the ecological fallacy with US Census data showing that the aggregate-level correlation between literacy and the share of the population that was born abroad was positive. The naïve conclusion that immigrants were more literate in English than natives was wrong; rather, immigrants clustered in areas where the native-born population had especially high literacy rates, a fact that could not be gleaned directly from the aggregate data.

typically concluded that American “exceptionalism” in terms of voter turnout is due not to a less engaged or more cynical or ignorant public, but to the institutional differences mentioned above, primarily the difficulty of registering and voting in the US (both because elections fall on weekdays and because they occur so often and usually involve immensely complicated ballots featuring a vast array of choices).

Figures 2 and 3 show German turnout data to make this comparison more concrete. Figure 2 shows national turnout levels in federal elections and in elections to the European parliament. The federal elections mainly see turnout in the 80-90% range, far in excess of American presidential elections, as is well known. On the other hand, they exhibit a similar drop: if one omits the post-war 1949 case as an anomaly, the average for the 1950s through the 1980s is about 8 percentage points higher than the average turnout over the last four contests. As with the American case, where enfranchisement of 18-21-year olds played a role in the turnout slip, there is an obvious potential culprit for this change. Reunification set in motion a unique experiment in merging a mature democracy and a post-authoritarian country newly (and instantly) democratized following the collapse of communism. Germany is thus a hybrid of East and West, unlike all of its European neighbours, be they old democracies or new ones. Figure 3, however, suggests that the eastern states are not solely to blame for lower turnout in recent federal races, since the Baden-Württemberg series bears a strong resemblance to its federal counterpart. Both figures also reflect another similarity with the American data: in state elections, turnout is consistently substantially lower than in national contests; in European elections, it is lower still, and seems to be falling.

Because of Germany’s unusual merger of bicameralism and federalism, state elections simultaneously determine state government and affect composition of the upper house of the national government, so the federal-state contrast is more similar to the presidential-midterm contrast in the US than it might first appear. The data for Baden-Württemberg are typical, not unusual, in the 10-15% gap in turnout between successive federal and state contests. Since the eligible electorate changes little over short periods, the obvious place to look in explaining the difference is the demand side, not the supply side. European scholars often label state and local election “second-tier,” and posit that the offices are less salient to voters and perceived to be less important (even if the powers of the more local governments affect aspects of life that voters notice most directly). The European elections stand out even more on Figures 2 and 3, however, revealing that the “tier” metaphor may miss the mark if taken literally. The project of building a supra-national government structure atop the states of Europe is clearly at a crisis mode just now, with the nascent Constitution having been rejected by the French and Dutch publics. But turnout data—not only in Germany—have suggested all along that the citizens of those states where voting is not compulsory have not been swept up in the endeavour of creating a continent-wide political union.

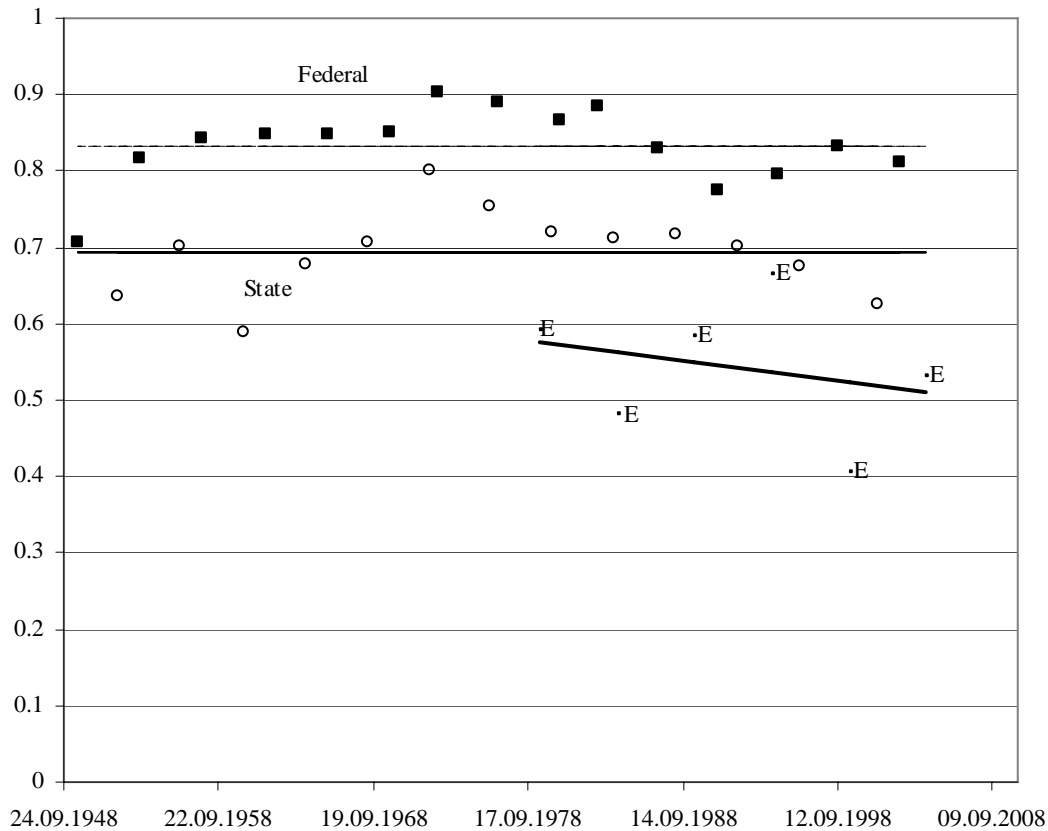
Commentators on American elections who are forever worrying that low turnout is a blemish and sign of a disaffected electorate need to take more seriously the unusually stringent voting process in the US. What lesson should commentators on German politics (or, indeed, European politics) draw from the apparent public disengagement from EU



**Figure 2. Turnout in Germany, 1949-2004**

elections? A full answer, naturally, requires a great deal more context and will depend in part on survey data. But the simple cost-benefit framework and the contrast between federal, state, and European races suggest a few hypotheses. Political attitudes are a trait of both the voter and the institution, and the EU remains too remote, mysterious, and/or boring to too many voters, who can nonetheless be brought out to the polls in overwhelming numbers for national races. Part of the oddity of the EU, of course, is that only the parliament is directly elected, and ardent democrats view this feature as its Achilles heel. Of course, the German upper house is indirectly elected, much like the Council, so the main area of democratic deficit in EU institutions, from the German point of view, would seem to be the Commission. A second point is that the legislative process in the EU is devilishly complicated—a boon for game theorists who continue to debate whether successive changes have made the Parliament more or less powerful relative to the Council and Commission, but a headache to ordinary people with limited attention for politics. Moreover, the parliament is oddly structured, with party groupings that unite members who differ markedly on many key issues (e.g. British Conservatives and German Christian Democrats). Dissent within parties is not unknown in German (or American) domestic politics, but the EU seems to strain the popular understanding of a party, and thus diminish the public’s ability to develop attachment or identification with the blocs of members who are putatively united to advance particular policy goals there.





**Figure 3. Baden-Württemberg Turnout, 1949-2004**

To make yet another American comparison, the 1992 presidential election saw a surge in turnout due mostly to the candidacy of eccentric billionaire H. Ross Perot. Perot excited many who disliked both major American parties. By the 2-party standard, German elections are rich in their offerings, the 3-party system of the 1950s through 80s having evolved into a 5-party system as the Greens sprouted and the ex-Communists joined the scene through reunification. But in a general sense, turnout is responsive to the range of policy options on display, and more prominent and serious anti-EU parties might, paradoxically, be one route to increasing interest and participation in elections to the EU parliament. The 2000 and 2004 US presidential elections seem to have demonstrated that closeness (or expected closeness) drive up turnout, perhaps because voters are not able to compute probabilities or perhaps because parties and groups work much harder at mobilizing supporters (inducing solidarity and possible guilt and regret) when they expect a photo finish. There is some variation across German elections in terms of the level of suspense associated with their outcomes, but the combination of the party system and the electoral formula has meant that most federal contests are not seen as foregone conclusions. In that sense, most state and federal contests have the built-in turnout bonus of medium-high suspense about the outcome. The European Union elections, meanwhile,

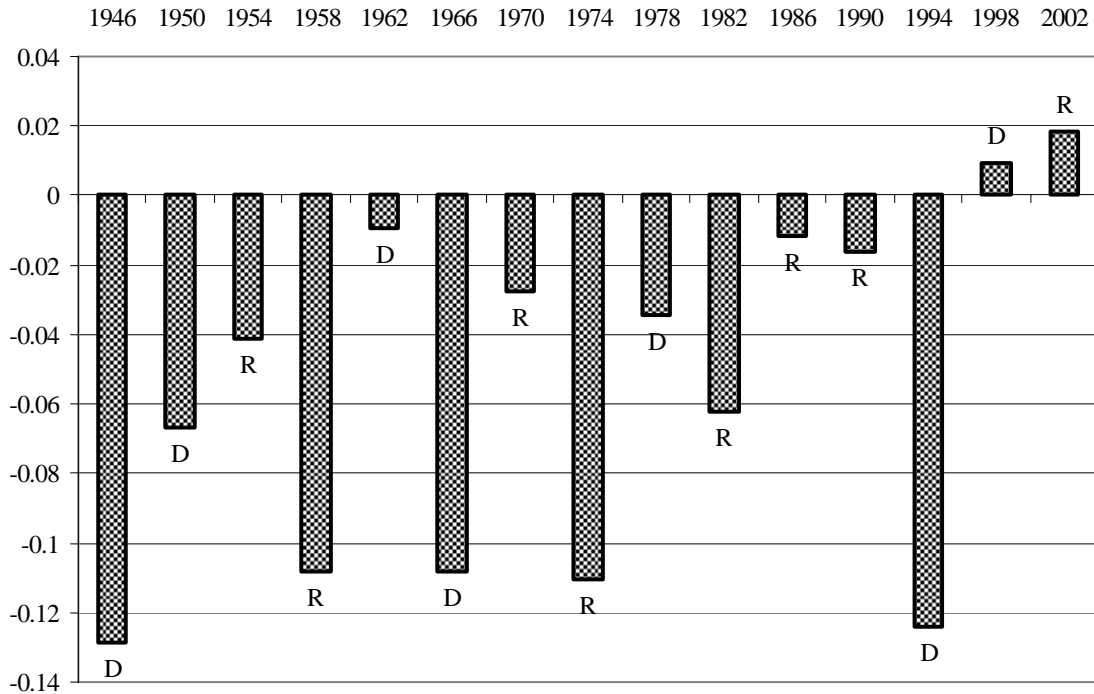
have the feature that little seems to change as seats shift between groupings, partly because there is no government formation process as such. There is no obvious remedy for this contrast, for those who see low turnout in the EU races as problematic, but it is probably still useful to attempt to catalogue the features of the institution that seem to induce apathy.

Turnout is, in a sense, merely the first and smallest step in citizen involvement in democratic government. An immediate follow-up question is how and why people who do choose to vote select which parties and candidates to support. With limited space, I cannot possibly summarize the entire literature on voting behaviour, but I will close by highlighting an intriguing pattern evident in both the US and Germany.

### MODERATING ELECTIONS

One of the strong regularities in American elections for most of the Twentieth Century was the “midterm loss,” wherein the party of the president suffered a loss of votes and seats in the US House elections two years after the presidential election. In 1934, President Roosevelt saw his Democrats gain 9 seats, marking the first midterm *gain* for nearly a century, and the last instance of a *non*-loss until 1998. Inevitably, a large number of competing theories sprung up to explain the pattern. Broadly speaking, the theories fell into two camps. Some postulated that midterm losses represented conscious efforts by citizens to limit the power and influence of the president, and that its regularity suggested that Americans routinely make use of separation-of-powers to tie the hands of the most powerful leader in the land, and thus to dampen swings in policy. By contrast, others suggested that the inference that voters were fine-tuning policy in this manner was at odds with most evidence about how little attention most citizens pay to politics, not to mention the collective action problems involved in coordination. Instead, they proposed that the loss was in a sense an accident of differences in turnout, as reflected in Figure 1. If the “extra” voters drawn out by presidential elections but not midterms differ systematically in ways that make them more susceptible to short-term forces (for instance, they are less intensely partisan), then there could be a natural “surge and decline” in support for the party that wins each presidential election over each four-year cycle.

Despite a great deal of innovative research, there is not as yet full consensus on the scholarly side about over the relative contributions of turnout swings and deliberate citizen balancing in the moderating election phenomenon. It is not too difficult to construct statistical models that “explain” the variance in the size of the midterm loss (depicted in terms of seat shifts in Figure 4), with factors such as the level of exposure of the presidential party (i.e. how many seats it holds going into the midterm), the president’s approval rating, and whether or not the country is at war being typical examples of variables that perform well statistically. However, the underlying substantive explanation at the level of the voter is more elusive, and one should not take too seriously statistical models based on very small numbers of cases (e.g. 15 midterm elections). For present purposes, an important point is that these two explanations differ



**Figure 4. Midterm Swings in Presidential party Seat Share, U.S. House**

markedly in the extent to which they view citizens as intelligent users of American democratic machinery, and, thus, whether the outcomes should be thought of as expressions of public will, or accidents of complicated institutions. A second point made clear by Figure 4 is that the last two midterm elections have broken the long-time pattern. Some offer idiosyncratic explanations for 1998 and 2002, for instance that impeachment by over-zealous Republican Representatives caused a backlash of support for Bill Clinton in 1998 and that in 2002, George W. Bush made selective, strategic and successful interventions in races where the increasingly polarized American electorate leaned to the right, but had Democratic Representatives. These explanations are, of course, couched in terms of voter intentions, and would seem to fit the “balancing” school better than the surge-and-decline school of thought. Both, however, are built around loose conjecture at least as much as they are actual hard empirical evidence.

Arguably, moderating elections are even more important and at least as strongly in evidence in Germany as they are in the US. Their importance stems from the aforementioned constitutional feature wherein German federalism is married to bicameralism. American elections see moderation occur via separation-of-powers, and the difference between the presidential and congressional election calendars. In Germany, instead, the natural way to take some wind out of the sails of a national government is for voters to turn against the parties forming the governing coalition at the federal level in subsequent

state elections. The evidence that there is, indeed, a “penalty” for governing nationally, suffered by parties in state polls, is quite consistent. In statistical models attempting to separate reward and punishment of governments for economic performance from this incumbency penalty, the economic effects are small and subtle, while the anti-government swing is dramatic. Evidence for analogous swings against parties that govern at the state level, in voting for federal or European elections, is mixed and fairly weak. One caveat to these generalizations is that junior partners in federal coalitions appear to suffer less. Both the FDP and the Greens have for their respective life spans, typically enjoyed levels of support that place them perilously close to the threshold for winning PR seats, and so they are both more buffeted by electoral tides than the large parties. On the other hand, taking part in governing the nation has not proven nearly as costly for the small parties in terms of performance in state and European polls.

To make these claims more exact, consider that in the fourteen state elections held between the 1998 and 2002 federal elections, the SPD lost, on average, 8 percentage points of vote share as compared to its 1998 result. The SPD also lost vote share when the baseline was the prior state election, but much less dramatically, as the average loss was only about 1 percentage point. At one extreme, in Thuringia in 1999, the SPD saw its vote share fall 11 points, and with it, the party’s status as junior member of the governing coalition. In no state did the SPD enter government over this period. While the SPD was suffering the curse of (federal) incumbency, the CDU/CSU gained an average of about 8 points (as against the 1998 federal race) or 2 points (as against prior state results), and went from being in opposition to being in government in 6 cases. Results like these have been fairly typical in Germany for the last 50 years, and the conclusion that the most senior member of the federal coalition will suffer in state races seems quite robust, even when one attempts to control for whether the status as federal government is new or not since the prior state poll, whether the upper house is also controlled by the party of the Chancellor, how well the national and state economies are doing, and so on.

However much its support drooped between 1998 and 2002, the SPD-Green coalition was, of course, returned to power. One take on that outcome is that voters had made such effective use of state elections (and the upper house) to rein in the government that actually throwing them out was not necessary. Most commentators, instead, emphasized short-term events, particularly severe flooding that allowed Schröder to dominate news and demonstrate non-programmatic competence, and foreign policy, especially opposition to American plans to overthrow the heinous regime of Saddam Hussein. Interestingly, in the inter-election period following the 2002 result (which is now being abbreviated by the early, forthcoming 2005 election), the SPD once again suffered multiple state-level setbacks. Indeed, the most recent inter-election period has seen perhaps the best evidence to date of an incumbent’s curse, as support for the SPD has seemed to be in free fall. Table 1 shows just how poorly the senior member of the federal government has done in recent German state elections. Compared to the numbers cited just above, second-term SPD state-level losses have been gigantic, with about a 13-point drop from the 2002 result, on average, and a 7-point slump as against the prior state results. From 1998 to 2002, SPD partisans could take comfort from noting that their party’s vote shares were low relative to the high of the 1998 win, but not much down

compared to the previous state polls. Of late, no matter how one cuts it, the SPD is being trounced. If the party has lost power in fewer state governments, that is mainly because the 1998-2002 period had already weakened its hold on the levers of power in state capitals.

With moderating elections more in evidence than ever in Germany, but suddenly absent in the US, a natural concluding question is whether either state should be read as demonstrating the power of insightful citizens to effect changes of policy through indirect means. In both states, that conclusion is far from proven, but is at least as plausible as various alternative theories. I would suggest that the moderating elections phenomenon can be taken as good fodder to use against pessimists who see only disengagement by electorates or who fear that voters are not up to the tasks envisioned for them in classical democratic theory. Of course, I have not touched at all on another common, recent argument, that what really plagues the governments of the world's mature democracies of late is blame without power. Many argue that globalization, increasing integration of the world's economies, the ease with which capital can be moved worldwide, and like forces mean that governments have less and less control over outcomes, and voting is, increasingly, symbolic or even superstitious punishment (or reward) of actors who have lost or ceded their powers. That argument constitutes a profound critique of the democratic process, and it should be evaluated by serious empirical investigation of as many of its claims as can be translated into precise hypotheses about how the world's elections ought to differ.

**Table 1: German State Election Results September 2002 – September 2005**  
 Federal Government: Coalition of SPD (senior) and Green (junior)

State	Date	Change in Second Vote Share (% points)										Government Before	Government After
		from 2002 federal election					from prior state election						
		CDU*	SPD	FDP	Green	PDS	CDU*	SPD	FDP	Green	PDS		
Hesse	2.03	+11.7	-10.6	-0.3	-0.6	-1.3	+5.4	-10.3	+2.8	+2.9	0.0	CDU-FDP	CDU
Lower Saxony	2.03	+13.8	-14.5	+1.0	+0.3	-0.5	+12.4	-14.5	+3.3	+0.6	+0.5	<i>SPD</i>	<b>CDU-FDP</b>
Bremen	5.03	+5.2	-6.2	-2.5	-2.2	-0.6	-7.4	-0.2	+1.7	+3.9	-1.2	SPD-CDU	SPD-CDU
Bavaria*	9.03	+2.1	-6.5	-1.9	+0.1	-0.7	+7.8	-9.1	+0.9	+2.1	0.0	CSU	CSU
Hamburg	2.04	+19.2	-11.5	-4.0	-3.9	-2.1	+21.0	-6.0	-2.2	+3.7	-0.4	CDU-FDP	CDU
Saarland	9.04	+12.5	-15.1	-1.2	-1.9	0.9	+1.9	-13.5	+2.6	+2.4	+1.5	CDU	CDU
Saxony	9.04	+7.6	-23.5	-1.4	+0.5	+7.4	-15.8	-0.9	+4.8	+2.6	+1.4	CDU	<b>CDU-SPD</b>
Brandenburg	9.04	-2.8	-14.5	-2.5	-0.9	+10.7	-7.1	-7.4	+1.5	+1.7	+4.6	SPD-CDU	SPD-CDU
Thuringia	9.04	+13.6	-25.4	-2.2	+0.3	+9.1	-8.0	-4.0	+2.5	+2.7	+4.7	CDU	CDU
Schleswig-Holstein	2.05	+4.1	-4.2	-1.6	-3.1	-0.6	+4.9	-4.4	-1.0	0.0	-0.6	<i>SPD-Grn</i>	<b>CDU-SPD</b>
N. Rhine- Westphalia	5.05	+9.7	-5.9	-3.2	-2.7	-0.3	+7.9	-5.7	-3.7	-0.9	-0.2	<i>SPD-Grn</i>	<b>CDU-FDP</b>
mean		+8.8	-12.5	-1.8	-1.3	+2.0	+2.1	-6.9	+1.2	+2.0	+9.4		
standard deviation		6.3	7.0	1.4	1.6	4.7	10.7	4.6	2.5	1.5	2.0		

\* substitute CSU for CDU in Bavaria

Italicized vote shares designate parties that failed to win any seats. Italicized party labels designate parties leaving government, while bold labels identify parties entering government

## SELECTED REFERENCES

### *Measuring Turnout in US*

McDonald, Michael P. and Samuel L. Popkin. 2001. "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter." *American Political Science Review* 95, 4 (December): 963-974.

### *Rational Choice Models of Turnout*

Austen-Smith, David and Jeffrey S. Banks. 2005. *Positive Political Theory II*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

### *Ecological Inference*

Robinson, W.S. 1950. "Ecological Correlations and the Behavior of Individuals." *American Sociological Review* 15, 3 (June): 351-357.

### *Survey Research on Turnout*

Rosenstone, Steven J. and John Mark Hansen. 1993. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Teixeira, Ruy A. 1992. *The Disappearing American Voter*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

### *Comparative Turnout*

Powell, G. Bingham, Jr. 1986. "American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective." *American Political Science Review* 80, 1 (March): 17-43.

### *Moderating Elections in the US*

Alesina, Alberto and Howard Rosenthal. 1995. *Partisan Politics, Divided Government, and the Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### *Moderating Elections in Germany*

Gaines, Brian J. and Christophe Crombez. 2004. "Another Look at Connections Across German Elections." *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 16, 3 (July): 289-319.