Re-Thinking Turnout
Explaining Within-Individual Variation in Electoral Participation

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Ph.D. thesis defence on 7 July 2017

Abstract

This thesis presents four essays that aim to explain within-individual variation in voter turnout. The motivation behind this thesis is not only the importance of voter turnout to democracy, both in theoretical and substantive terms, but also the methodological and theoretical weaknesses in the existing literature caused by the lack of attention given to why individuals vote at some points in their lives and not at others. This deficit stands in contrast to the vast literature explaining aggregate-level turnout – both within and between countries – and individual-level turnout solely between individuals. Each of the four essays seeks to re-think one of the explanatory models of individual-level voter turnout – mobilisation, resources, psychology and socialisation - by applying many of their determinants to within-individual variation, as well as, in some cases, adding new ones. The methodological approach to explaining within-individual variation is to use fixed effects panel data models, as well as intermittently random effects models, cross-sectional models and structural equations. The data for these models comes from the British Household Panel Survey, the Swiss Household Panel Survey and the British Election Study. This thesis makes a number of theoretical, methodological and substantive contributions. I show that within-individual variation in voting seems to be fairly unaffected by such issues as material resources, ‘anti-political’ sentiments, household politicisation or even feelings of personal ability to vote effectively – all of which have been mainstays of the between-individual literature. Rather, I conclude that individuals vote when they are interested in the politics of the time, feel affinity towards a party or when a party has bothered to contact them, on the one hand, and, more fundamentally, by the lifestyle of the individual at the time of the election – with lifestyles built on rootedness, social integration and roles demanding responsibility increasing the individual’s desire to turnout to vote.
Jury: Hanspeter Kriesi (EUI) (Supervisor), James Dennison (candidate), Geoffrey Evans (Nuffield College), Diego Gambetta (EUI), and Harold C. Clarke over skype

Bio

James Dennison is a PhD Researcher at the European University Institute where his research interests include political participation, electoral behaviour and public opinion. He is the author of The Greens in British Politics (Palgrave, 2016) and has published articles on British, Italian, and European politics. James taught quantitative methods at the University of Sheffield and was a Visiting Fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford. Before entering academia, he worked at the European Commission and Houses of Parliament. From July 2017 onwards he will be a Research Fellow at the Migration Policy Centre, part of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies