The Vote Matters:
Race, Turnout, and Representation in City Politics

A Book Prospectus

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Precis

There is a widespread belief that turnout matters in American elections. For one, politicians act like it does. Every election cycle they spend countless man hours and millions of dollars trying to get supporters to the polls. Media commentators also believe that it matters. Few electoral contests end before members of the media get a chance to proclaim that “voter turnout will be critical.” And perhaps most importantly, normative theorists worry that it matters. Since voters are much more likely than non-voters to be white, wealthy, and well educated, many fear that the interests of racial and ethnic minorities and the poor will be regularly ignored by elected officials who rely on voters to gain and retain office (Piven and Cloward 1988, Schattschneider 1970, Verba et al 1995).

Yet, as widely held as this conventional wisdom may be, it gets little empirical support. Political scientists who have tried to investigate these claims empirically have generally found that fears of a skewed electorate leading to biased outcomes are largely unfounded. When the preferences of voters are compared to the preferences of non-voters, researchers find only marginal differences (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Bennit and Resnick 1990, Gant and Lyons 1993). According to one of the most prominent books on the subject, “voters are relatively representative of the public” (Verba et al, 1995:512). More importantly, there is little evidence to suggest that increasing or decreasing turnout would change who wins and loses. Although some studies have found that increasing turnout might alter the margin of victory slightly in some contests, the findings are often highly variable and the effects are never large (Citrin et al 2003, De Nardo 1980, Nagel and McNulty 1996). As one study recently noted, "There is no indication that the preferences of nonvoters would have reversed many - or any - elections for which we have reliable evidence" (Petrocik 2003:20). Were we to dramatically alter turnout rates across the United States, the conclusion from these studies is that we would get more of the same.

But are these studies overlooking something? The existing literature has focused almost exclusively on national elections for President or Congress and has largely ignored elections at the state and local level. Focusing on national level elections is reasonable given their central role in American politics but I contend that this narrow focus minimizes the chances of finding bias. In this book, I highlight two reasons why national level elections are different and why turnout might matter more in other types of contests. First, turnout is much higher in national elections than in other electoral contests around the country. The average presidential election gets over fifty percent of the voting age population to participate. Local elections for mayor, council, or school board average half of that if not lower (Bridges 1997, Hajnal and Lewis 2003). Simple logic dictates that the lower the turnout, the larger the possible skew in terms of who turns out. If almost everyone votes, there can be very little skew to the electorate. If, however, a small fraction turns out, the skew could be severe. Thus, if we are looking for bias in outcomes, we might want to look outside of national elections.

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1 This sentiment regarding the 2004 presidential election was echoed in a range of media outlets including this quote in a story in the Midland Reporter-Telegram on November 2nd.
2 Given that elected officials need the support of voters in order to get elected and re-elected, there is, in fact, a compelling logic to that fear (Key 1949).
3 Hill and Leighley (1992) and Hill et al (1995) do, however, focus on turnout at the state level and importantly find that voter turnout can affect state level policy.
Second, due to the uneven distribution of the population across geographic boundaries, groups that are small minorities and largely insignificant at the national level can be major players within many states and even more so within many cities. Asian Americans, for example, make up less than four percent of the national population and are too small to have much sway in national contests. But Asian Americans represent the majority of the population in Hawaii and a third of the population of San Francisco and San Jose. In general, where racial minorities live, they make up sizeable shares of the local electorate and their voting or non-voting could greatly impact electoral outcomes. If we are concerned about the effects of a skew in the electorate we need to look not just at the national electorate as a whole but at a series of smaller political units where the impact of different groups could affect outcomes.

Unfortunately, although there are strong reasons to suspect that turnout is critical at the local level, political scientists have failed to look for turnout effects in the local political arena.\footnote{The last published article on bias in local voter turnout was written over thirty years ago and it only looked at one city (Alford and Lee 1968).} The goal of this project is to provide a clear and systematic account of how and where turnout matters in local politics. As such, I examine three of the most central features of the urban political arena. First, I look at how simulating even turnout across racial and ethnic groups would affect who wins and who loses in mayoral elections in the nation’s 20 largest cities over the past decade.\footnote{This data set includes 45 elections in the following cities: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, San Diego, Detroit, Dallas, San Antonio, Phoenix, San Jose, Baltimore, Indianapolis, San Francisco, Jacksonville, Columbus, Milwaukee, Memphis, Washington, and Boston.} These simulations suggest that almost a third of the winners would change. Second, using a 1986 survey of all municipalities over 2500 in population and a similar 2001 survey of all cities in California, I assess how turnout affects racial and ethnic representation on city councils nationwide. Here, the results indicate that moderate increases in turnout could rectify about one quarter of the under-representation of Latinos and Asian Americans on city councils in low turnout municipalities. Finally, to see if the effects of turnout extend to the arena of policy making, I use the same two surveys coupled with data on local government finances from the Census of Governments to examine the relationship between voter turnout and local government spending priorities. Once again, higher turnout is associated with different, more minority friendly outcomes. Municipalities with higher turnout, spend more on welfare and other areas favored by minorities and less on development and other areas favored by more advantaged, white interests. In an era of policy devolution, where policies are increasingly initiated and implemented at the local level, these findings raise serious questions about American democracy.

This book speaks to at least three debates in the American politics and racial politics literature. First and most obviously, it demonstrates that in certain important contexts, voter turnout has significant consequences. It affects who is elected mayor, who is elected to city council, and who benefits from public spending. This challenges much of what we know about turnout in American today and ultimately tells us that whether or not turnout matters depends on where we are looking. Second, the importance of turnout raises concerns about the democratic process itself. The fact that governments are responding less to the least advantaged members of society than to other groups who are more active is a sign that democracy, as we practice it today, may be fundamentally flawed. Certainly, we might want to consider reforms to rectify some of the imbalance. For those interested specifically in the welfare of racial and ethnic minorities, there is also a strong warning and a clear lesson here. We must acknowledge that
racial and ethnic minorities are losing out in the local political arena because of their irregular political participation. Were racial minorities and members of other disadvantaged groups to vote more, we would likely find that American democracy served them better. If we care about the well-being of members of the black, Latino, and Asian American communities, we need to find ways to encourage their participation. Lastly, the book offers one more lesson for scholars of American politics. The sharp contrast between turnout effects at the local and national levels suggests that broad conclusions about the merits of American democracy based exclusively on assessments of either national politics or local politics are likely to be misleading.

This project also offers solutions to the under-participation and under-representation of less advantaged groups. Analysis of local institutional structure indicates that small changes in local structure – such as changing the dates of local elections to coincide with the dates of state and national elections or moving to partisan elections – could dramatically expand voter turnout nationwide. This would not guarantee fair and equitable representation but it might move us a long way toward it.
Audience

This book should appeal to a wide cross-section of audiences. My principal audience will be political scientists who study political participation, racial and ethnic politics, and urban politics. The topic, and my findings on it, may also draw the notice of non-academics. As such, I aim also to make the research accessible to potentially interested political consultants, local elected officials, minority activists, and interest group advocates.

Length, Format, and Style

I anticipate a relatively slim volume. The manuscript – in standard format with double-spacing, Times Roman 12 point font, 1-inch margins – should approximate 250 pages in length. The empirical body of the book – chapters Three through Six – will include a substantial number of tables and figures (on average, about five per chapter, tables and figures combined). In terms of style, I plan to write this book to be within the reach of non-scholarly audiences as well as political scientists. I hope to do this with the following steps: animate each chapter with important normative and policy questions, use technical details and disciplinary jargon only sparingly within the text; present any tables and figures that appear in the main body clearly and vividly.

Timetable

At present I have finished drafts of six of the seven chapters. All of the empirical analysis is complete. I have also begun a draft of the one substantive chapter that remains. The only other tasks that are left to do are the conclusion and some light editing of the already completed chapters. Thus, I anticipate the completion of the full manuscript by March of 2006.
Introduction. The Vote and Democracy

Voters tend to look differently than non-voters. Voters are much more likely than non-voters to come from the ranks of the wealthy, the well-educated, and the white community. This has raised widespread concerns about American democracy. If elected officials respond more to citizens who participate than those who do not participate, as we might think they should, there is reason to believe that democracy will represent the interests of the privileged few who vote regularly over the broader concerns of the masses who vote less regularly. Empirical political science has generally found, however, that turnout has few consequences. In the introduction I raise this puzzle and argue that the empirical findings to date are incomplete. I overview my theory which details more clearly and more logically where turnout should matter. I also outline the different tests that I will use to assess the role of turnout in local politics. And finally, I raise two other important questions that will undergird much of the rest of the book: 1) how well are minorities represented in American democracy and 2) who or what governs the local political arena?

Chapter One. Where Turnout Should Matter

This chapter reviews the existing literature on voter turnout which, with few exceptions, concludes that low voter turnout has few real consequences for American politics. I note the narrow focus of the literature on national elections and explain why turnout should matter more outside of national contests. Specifically, I point to two factors – relatively high turnout in national elections and a relatively small racial and ethnic minority population – that could minimize the impact of turnout in national contests.

Chapter Two. Conditions at the Local Level

If turnout is to have an effect, three conditions are required. Some groups must vote less regularly than other groups. Groups that vote less regularly must choose different candidates from groups that vote more regularly. And groups that vote less regularly must be large enough to affect outcomes. This chapter outlines the logic of each of these conditions and then demonstrates that each is present in the local political arena. Survey data show that white, wealthy, well educated residents report voting in local elections at nearly twice the rate of racial and ethnic minorities, the poor, and members of other disadvantaged groups. Exit poll data indicate substantial racial divides in local voting preferences. And census data demonstrate that the typical racial and ethnic minority resident lives in a city where her own group makes up a sizeable portion of the local population. The local political arena is ripe for turnout to matter.

Chapter Three. Race, Turnout, and Winners in Mayoral Elections

I then begin to assess how much turnout affects outcomes at the local level by simulating the outcomes of 45 mayoral elections in the nation’s largest cities under conditions of even turnout across racial and ethnic groups. These simulations suggest not only that many of the winners would be different if turnout were less skewed by race and ethnicity but also that one group, Latino voters, stands to gain the most from more even turnout.
Chapter Four. Turnout and Minority Representation on City Councils
This chapter examines racial and ethnic representation on city councils nationwide and asks whether the racial composition of councils is more equitable in cities with higher – and presumably more diverse – turnout. Through an analysis of a nationally representative sample of municipalities and a supplementary examination of a more recent sample of California cities, I am able to demonstrate a clear link between turnout and minority representation. When turnout is low, Asian American and Latino representation is far below parity but as turnout expands much of the under-representation of the Latino and Asian American community is eliminated. For African Americans, by contrast, the model highlights reform of local electoral institutions as the best tool for expanding political representation.

Chapter Five. Turnout and Local Government Spending Priorities
The most unambiguous indication of whether or not minority preferences are being represented is where a government spends its money. Therefore, in this last test of turnout, I look to see whether the spending patterns of cities match the expressed policy preferences of most members of the minority community more closely in cities with higher turnout than in cities with lower turnout. Once again, the results suggest that turnout is critical. As turnout expands, local governments shift significant resources toward social welfare programs and other policy areas favored by minorities and members of other less advantaged groups. The results in this chapter also shed light on the larger question of who or what governs the local political arena. Through an analysis of local government spending priorities, I am able to adjudicate between political, economic, bureaucratic, and institutional accounts of urban politics.

Chapter Six. Raising Voter Turnout
What can we do to address the problem of low and uneven voter turnout? In the search for policy levers to raise turnout, I consider reform on each of the four primary dimensions of turnout – individual demographics, political attitudes, political mobilization, and institutional structure – and ultimately conclude that institutional reform offers the best hope for alleviating the under-representation of less advantaged interests. Then using a survey of the nation’s municipalities, I show that relatively small changes in local electoral structures can have dramatic effects on turnout.

Conclusion. America’s Uneven Democracy
In my concluding remarks, I briefly highlight the main findings regarding turnout and minority representation and note the importance of expanded voter participation. I also note that with continued growth in the Latino and Asian American populations and the ongoing under-participation of both groups turnout could become even more critical in the future. In addition, I draw attention to other contexts – including state level politics – where turnout might matter. I then go on to consider a range of normative concerns related to increased turnout.
Author’s Background Information

Zoltan Hajnal is an assistant professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego and former research fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California. His research interests include minority representation, urban governance, inequality, political participation, and direct democracy. Hajnal is the author of numerous articles in journals such as The American Political Science Review, The Journal of Politics, Urban Affairs Review, and Social Science Quarterly. He recently received the American Political Science Association’s award for Best Paper on Urban Politics and has a forthcoming book titled Changing White Attitudes toward Black Political Leadership (Cambridge University Press). He holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago and a B.S. from Yale University.
Bibliography


