

The Rise and Decline of Turnout in Congressional Elections: Electoral Institutions, Competition, and Strategic Mobilization

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Considerable debate exists over the impact of electoral institutions on turnout in U.S. national elections. To address this debate, I exploit the rich variation in electoral rules present throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Using a newly constructed dataset of district-level turnout results for the U.S. House from 1840 to 1940, I find that electoral institutions and political competition jointly provided incentives, and by the turn-of-the-century disincentives, for political leaders to mobilize the electorate. The results demonstrate that changes in electoral institutions and varying levels of political competition help explain congressional turnout across districts and over time.

Turnout constitutes one of the central and most important aspects of democratic politics. Variation in turnout can determine who wins elections and the policy choices elected representatives subsequently make. For this reason, any feature of electoral politics that might influence turnout deserves special attention. One feature that has attracted a fair amount of scholarly attention is electoral institutions (e.g., Cox 1999; Jackman 1987; Lijphart 1997; Powell 1986). The rules that organize how votes are cast and how those votes turn into democratic representation, some suspect, shape the incentives of elites to mobilize electorates and thereby the incentives of citizens to vote.

Yet in the context of contemporary U.S. congressional elections, assessing the impact of electoral institutions on turnout runs into a formidable challenge. Large-scale changes in electoral rules have been rare. Moreover, the rules governing modern congressional elections are largely uniform across districts (Jacobson 2009). Congressional elections are all held on the same day. All voters cast a secret ballot. Districts contain nearly equal populations. Suffrage requirements, with minor exceptions, are standardized. Consequently, the extent to which electoral rules influence turnout remains an open question.

In this article, I exploit the rich variation of electoral rules present in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States to study this question. Because the framers of the U.S. Constitution delegated election administration principally to state legislatures, the states were free to establish and change their election laws. Accordingly, the rules for electing legislative representatives—such as ballot formats, electoral calendars, and districting arrangements—varied widely across districts and over time. In addition to variation in election laws, the intensity of political competition, both at the local and national levels, differed considerably across jurisdictions and over time. This abundant cross-sectional and cross-temporal variation makes for a rare and powerful opportunity to study the impact of electoral rules and political competition on turnout.

To assess the extent to which electoral institutions and political competition influenced turnout, I have compiled a new dataset of turnout at the U.S. congressional district level from 1840 to 1940. Past research into historical turnout patterns has relied either on state-level results or select county-level results. By presenting district-level turnout for a 100-year period, this article offers a new and more comprehensive assessment of how electoral institutions have influenced the contours of political

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I thank Walt Stone, Nathan Monroe, Jason Roberts, and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions. The data and code necessary for replication are available at the Dataverse Network Project (<http://thedata.org>).

American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 56, No. 2, April 2012, Pp. 373–386

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DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5907.2011.00556.x

participation. In particular, the results presented here show that differences in ballot formats, differences in electoral calendars, differences in district sizes, and changes in the dynamics of electoral competition have fundamentally shaped democratic participation across districts and over time.

Electoral Institutions and Turnout

The standard calculus of voting suggests that most citizens, left to their own devices, will rationally stay home on Election Day (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). From the perspective of candidates and political parties, this situation constitutes a conventional collective action problem in which free riding by voters will lead to the under-supply of a collective good—the votes needed to capture office. Ambitious politicians who want to obtain elected office, therefore, have a strong incentive to try and solve these problems for citizens (Aldrich 1995). By providing citizens with direct benefits in exchange for voting, by making campaigns a form of popular entertainment, or by lessening the costs of traveling to the polls, elites have the capacity to prod citizens out of their otherwise rational inclinations toward apathy (Aldrich 1995; Green and Gerber 2008; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). The question then becomes: when and where do elites target mobilization efforts?

In an important analysis of how differences in political institutions can affect the strategic mobilization calculus of elites, and thereby turnout, Cox (1999) produced an illuminating typology to explain the incentives for mobilization provided by different electoral rules. According to Cox, parties face a basic trade-off over how much effort to allocate to mobilization (i.e., getting people to the polls) and how much to voter persuasion (i.e., convincing voters that they would be better off with your party in office). Cox groups the impact of electoral rules on this trade-off into three broad categories: (1) how efficiently mobilization translates into votes; (2) how efficiently votes translate into legislative seats; and (3) how efficiently seats translate into control of government. As the efficiency in these translations increases, the incentives to mobilize also rise.

While Cox has offered a powerful framework for thinking about the potential impact of electoral laws, empirically assessing this framework in the United States is rendered difficult by the stability and uniformity of contemporary election laws (Jacobson 2009). As a result, it can be easy to miss the potentially pervasive impact of electoral rules on turnout. There was a time in American politics, however, when diversity in electoral institutions

was immense. During the nineteenth century, variety in electoral rules characterized congressional elections. The U.S. Constitution delegated to the states responsibility for fashioning the details of election administration. Article I, Section 4 of the Constitution provides that “The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof. . . .” Although this clause also gave Congress the constitutional authority to regulate federal elections, for much of the nineteenth century the national government was content to let the states design electoral rules and procedures. Among the many important features that the states decided were how balloting would be conducted, when state and congressional elections would be held, and the size and shape of legislative districts. The result was a vast patchwork of electoral rules and procedures.

The rest of this section details how state electoral institutions varied and their potential consequences for turnout.

How Mobilization Turned into Votes

Balloting. Perhaps nowhere was the variety of electoral laws more evident than in the physical format and structure of casting ballots (Argersinger 1992; Bensel 2004; Engstrom and Kernell 2005; Rusk 1970). For most of the nineteenth century, ballots were printed and handed out by political parties. Only candidates of one particular party—from president on down—would be listed on the ticket. These “party strip ballots” provided little opportunity for voters to register office-by-office choices.¹ Straight-ticket voting consequently predominated. Moreover, voters typically deposited their party strip ballots in public. Any interested observers, such as party workers, could monitor voters as they cast these identifiable ballots (Bensel 2004). Party operatives could, therefore, be reasonably confident that a voter ushered to the polls, or given a payment, would dutifully vote for the entire party slate. As a result, the payoffs from mobilizing supporters, in terms of votes for multiple candidates of the same party, were considerable.

The spread of the Australian secret ballot, starting in 1888 and adopted in most states by 1910, severely complicated the task of mobilizing voters. Voters no longer had to worry about party operatives peering over their shoulder. But it also meant that party operatives could no longer ensure that those they polled (or paid) actually voted the “right way.” Moreover, by placing candidates

¹ Scratching out a name and writing in a substitute was sometimes possible but was cumbersome and would have been visible to interested observers (Bensel 2004; Rusk 1970).

of every party onto a single consolidated ballot, the new format eased the physical task of casting a split ticket (Engstrom and Kernell 2005; Harvey and Mukherjee 2006; Rusk 1970). As a result, the incentives of elites to shepherd these “less reliable” voters to the polls were severely diminished.

Despite the presumptive effects of the switch in ballot formats, there has been surprisingly little empirical research analyzing its impact on turnout. Two exceptions, however, merit attention. The first is Cox and Kousser’s (1981) study of upstate New York. Based on a detailed reading of contemporary newspaper stories, they found compelling evidence that party operatives willingly bought votes during the ticket era and shifted to a strategy of demobilization (i.e., paying swing voters to stay home) after passage of a secret ballot law in 1894. While their evidence is certainly persuasive, the study examines only one state and just the rural areas of that state. Heckelman’s (1995, 2000) examinations of gubernatorial elections represents the other exception. In these articles, Heckelman argued that the introduction of a secret ballot discouraged vote buying and thereby reduced turnout in gubernatorial elections. Heckelman’s argument and results are also persuasive. But while vote buying is an important part of the story, it alone cannot explain the incredible turnout of the era. The scope and scale of vote buying would have needed to be enormous.

Missing in previous work, moreover, is a full acknowledgment that the physical format of the Australian ballot was not uniform. Some states chose an office bloc format, which located offices in different areas of the ballot. Other states chose a party column format, which aligned same-party candidates into columns. The two formats had a clear, discernible impact on split-ticket voting. The office bloc ballot forced voters to manually work their way down the ballot and make separate choices for each office. The result was a significant uptick in split-ticket voting. In contrast, by emulating the old party strip ballots, the party column format still induced a substantial amount of straight-ticket voting (Rusk 1970).

There is good reason to suspect that the consequences for mobilization decisions were also substantial. Because the office bloc created more split-ticket voting, the rewards from mobilization diminished. Voters brought to the polls were now much less reliable. On the other hand, because straight-ticket voting remained more substantial in party column states, ushering partisans to the polls presumably remained a worthwhile investment. This leads to the following hypothesis concerning the effect of ballot regimes on turnout: *Party Ticket* > *Party Column* > *Office Bloc*. If the impact of the ballot was contained merely in the secrecy provisions, then we would expect no differ-

FIGURE 1 The Percentage of U.S. House Elections Held Separate from the November Election, 1840–1940



Note: The figure displays the percentage of U.S. House districts with elections held on a different day than the November election. The figure was compiled from data presented in Dubin (1998).

ence in turnout between the office bloc and party column (i.e., *Party Ticket* > *Party Column* = *Office Bloc*).

Electoral Calendars. While many students of electoral development have acknowledged the potential impact of the secret ballot on turnout rates, almost none have noted another prominent feature of nineteenth-century congressional elections—disjointed electoral calendars.² Unlike modern congressional elections, which are uniformly held the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November, states for most of the nineteenth century had discretion over when to hold congressional and state elections. As Figure 1 reveals, many states chose to separate congressional elections from the November election. Some states held their elections months before the November presidential contest, and others even held their elections in the following year. The formal consolidation of calendars began in 1872 when the U.S. Congress attached a provision to the Apportionment Act of 1872 that required a uniform national date for all federal elections. The consolidation was slated to take effect in 1876, but the law provided that if a state constitution already contained a specific date for holding elections then that state was not required

² A few studies have examined how electoral calendars affected voting in the nineteenth century. Carson et al. (2001) studied how electoral calendars affected elections during the Civil War. James (2007) examined how electoral outcomes in early states influenced outcomes later in the year. Engstrom and Kernell (2005) studied the impact of electoral calendars on presidential coattails. None of these articles consider the impact of nonsynchronized elections on turnout.

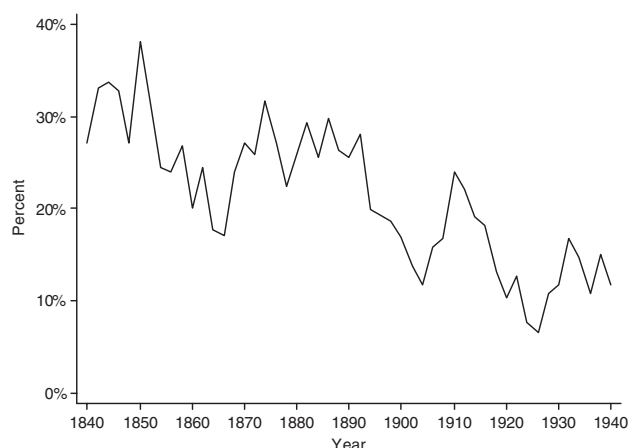
to switch. Taking advantage of this opt-out clause, a few states continued to hold non-November elections into the twentieth century.

There is good reason to suspect differential calendars had a dramatic effect on U.S. House turnout—especially during presidential election years. As parties campaigned for the presidency, candidates lower on the ballot, including congressional candidates, naturally might have been pulled along in the wake of the national campaign. Thus, one would expect a bigger surge in turnout for those congressional races synched up with the presidential contest.

Here then may be a major, but almost completely overlooked, factor contributing to the rise of congressional turnout in the latter part of the nineteenth century. As more states coordinated their congressional elections on the November presidential election, the increase in House turnout in presidential years followed suit. The impact of synchronizing elections has never, to my knowledge, been included in any over-time analysis of turnout in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This is a glaring omission. The results below demonstrate the sizable impact of election timing on turnout levels. Indeed, the historical peaks of turnout were reached precisely in the period after the bulk of states synchronized their electoral calendars yet before the widespread adoption of the secret ballot.

The Size of the Electorate. The wide variation in population across House districts and across time is another likely source of changes in turnout. Where more people need to be mobilized, the expenses of such effort increased (Cox and Munger 1989). Even though the U.S. House expanded its membership to adjust for population growth and the admittance of new states, the population growth of the country far outpaced the ability of the U.S. House to keep up. As a result, the population within House districts skyrocketed. In 1850 the average congressional district contained 99,000 people. By 1920 it had nearly doubled to 197,000 people (Parsons, Beach, and Dubin 1986; Parsons, Dubin, and Parsons 1990). Moreover, in this era before court-ordered “one person, one vote” mandates, population differences could be pronounced. For example, in New York in 1882 the 12th district (composed of Westchester County) contained 108,988 people while the 3rd district (a subset of Brooklyn) contained over twice that many people with a population of 222,718. These disparities were not confined to states with large urban centers. Consider the comparatively rural Wisconsin. In 1872 the 8th district of Wisconsin had only half as many people (82,217) as the nearby 5th district (158,421).

FIGURE 2 The Percentage of Marginal U.S. House Elections, 1840–1940



Note: This figure presents the percentage of U.S. House elections where the margin between the first- and second-place finisher was 5% or less. The figure was compiled from data presented in Dubin (1998).

Adding to the variation in electorate size were changes in suffrage requirements. Notably, the extension of female suffrage constituted the largest expansion of the electorate. Although the 19th Amendment fully enfranchised women across the nation, a number of states had already provided for female participation in federal elections prior to 1920 (Keyssar 2000, Table A.20). The analysis below includes a measure of when a state first allowed women to participate in national elections.³

How Votes Turned into Seats

Getting voters to the polls represents only the first step in the process of winning control of government. Those votes must then turn into seats. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, competition for House seats was intense. The percentage of districts where the winner won with 5% of the vote or less averaged an impressive 40% of districts throughout most of the nineteenth century. By the 1920s, the number of competitive congressional elections plummeted below 20% (Figure 2).

The correlation between local competitiveness and turnout has long been established in the political science literature (e.g., Key 1949). Although the explanation for why they correlate varies, the most plausible argument is that political leaders exert more effort getting supporters to the polls when they expect the election to be close (e.g.,

³Property requirements for voting eligibility had largely disappeared by 1840 (Keyssar 2000).

Cox and Munger 1989; Shachar and Nalebuff 1999).⁴ So, this may be a prime cause of the early twentieth-century turnout decline.

How Seats Turned into Control of Government

The next step in the calculus of mobilization involves the extent to which winning a local race contributes to winning control of governing institutions. When partisan control of government is a foregone conclusion, winning an individual House race loses its importance. On the other hand, when a handful of seats, or electors, can make the difference between majority and minority status, the incentives for mobilization shoot up. In the context of American elections, this directs our attention to party control of the U.S. House and competitiveness of the Electoral College.

Between 1870 and 1900, each party controlled the House of Representatives eight times. The average share of Democratic seats in the House over this period was 49.7% (Rusk 2001). This razor-thin balance between the two parties nationally meant that local contests often had national implications. Local congressional elections also took place in the context of national campaigns during presidential election years. While it is not surprising to suggest that presidential elections influence down-ballot races, the impact of presidential elections likely varied both over time and across states. With nineteenth-century presidential elections frequently decided by narrow margins (e.g., 1876, 1888), one might suspect that the impact of the presidential race on turnout for other offices was particularly pronounced. Between 1840 and 1900, the average popular vote margin between the winner and the runner-up was a mere 5.4% (Rusk 2001, 132). From 1900 to 1940, on the other hand, the average margin ballooned to 17%. But even during the height of presidential competition, not every state was critical. Some states were battlegrounds while others were foregone conclusions (James 2000). Moreover, many of the close states (e.g., New York, Ohio, Indiana) were rich with electoral votes.

The Costs of Voting

Up to this point I have been primarily concerned with how electoral institutions alter either the probability of

⁴The other possible explanation is that voters perceive their probability of being pivotal to be higher in closer elections. There are, of course, well-known problems with the pivotal voter theory. The probability of a voter being pivotal is essentially nil under almost any plausible scenario. The effort of leaders, however, can be pivotal through their mobilization of *groups* (e.g., Cox 1999; Shachar and Nalebuff 1999).

a party victory or the benefits of capturing a particular office. Yet another significant change in the electoral landscape concerned the cost side of the ledger. Notably, the imposition of registration laws in the states created a new obstacle for voting. For much of the nineteenth century there were no preexisting lists of eligible voters. To vote, a person simply had to show up at the polls with the requisite proof that they were eligible to vote. Between 1870 and 1920, states began requiring voters to appear on official voter registration rolls (Keyssar 2000, 117–71). To vote now required appearing on a preexisting list of eligible voters.

There is ample reason to suspect that registration had a dampening effect on turnout. By creating an extra obstacle to voting, one would suspect that the marginal cost of voting began to outweigh the benefits for many voters (e.g., Keyssar 2000; Kousser 1974; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). But registration also complicated the task of mobilization by party elites. Because the costs were now higher for voters, party elites presumably had a more difficult time getting marginal voters to the polls. Moreover, party operatives had to ensure that only registered voters were brought to the polls. Bringing a voter to the polling booth only to find out they are not eligible to vote would have been wasted effort.

Assessing the impact and magnitude of registration laws on contemporary turnout rates has received much scholarly attention (see Highton 2004). However, because almost every state nowadays requires some form of personal registration, assessing the magnitude of registration on turnout can be difficult.⁵ Here again, turning to the American states of the nineteenth and early twentieth century provides a new avenue to study this question. Some states passed statewide registration laws beginning in the period after Reconstruction, whereas others waited until the twentieth century (Keyssar 2000). As with the other electoral laws outlined above, the time-series and cross-sectional variation provided by the states offers a new opportunity to examine the extent to which this important institution altered turnout patterns.

Data and Estimation

While past research into American historical turnout has relied primarily on either state-level results or a selective sample of counties, a central contribution of this study is the creation of a new dataset on turnout results at the

⁵Ansolahehere and Konisky (2006) provide one important exception. Their powerful study takes advantage of changes in county-level registration laws in New York and Ohio to estimate the impact of registration on turnout.

congressional district level. The data cover the entire country from 1840 to 1940. The building blocks of the data come from the county-level turnout results compiled by Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale (1987). Because most U.S. House districts in this era were composed of one or more whole counties, it is possible, using historical congressional district maps and county-level turnout results, to aggregate up and calculate district-level turnout.

The county-level dataset reports both the total number of votes cast and the turnout percent for each county. The turnout percentage in each county was calculated by dividing the total number of votes cast by the number of eligible voters. The study's principal investigators determined the number of eligible voters in each county by consulting historical census reports and the various eligibility requirements for voting at the time of each election (i.e., age, race, and sex). To account for intercensus changes in the number of eligible voters, the principal investigators used linear interpolation. Although the dataset does not actually report the number of eligible voters by county, one can easily solve for this number (i.e., *Eligible Voters* = *Votes Cast* / *Turnout Proportion*). Once we know the total number of votes cast and the number of eligible voters in each county, it becomes relatively straightforward to calculate district-level turnout for those House districts comprising one or more whole counties. The numerator is the sum of votes cast across all the counties in the same district, and the denominator is the number of eligible voters across all those same counties.

This procedure fails, however, to accurately capture results for districts not composed of whole counties. First, urban counties often contained more than one congressional district (e.g., New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago). One can, however, get a reasonable estimate of district turnout using the county-level figures. The procedure was as follows. I determined the number of eligible voters per county using the county-level dataset (as above). Then using district-level population (Parsons, Beach, and Dubin 1986; Parsons, Dubin, and Parsons 1990), I calculated the proportion of the county that each district represents. As an example, consider a county with 10,000 people and two congressional districts: District 1 has 6,000 people and District 2 has 4,000. The contributing proportions for Districts 1 and 2 are then .6 and .4, respectively. Multiplying this proportion, for each district, by the number of county-wide eligible voters produces an estimate of district eligible voters. So, if our example county has 5,000 eligible voters then we would estimate that District 1 has 3,000 eligible voters and District 2 has 2,000. This procedure, of course, assumes that the proportion of eligible voters does not vary across same-county districts. But

absent data at the level of minor civil divisions, this is the best available alternative.

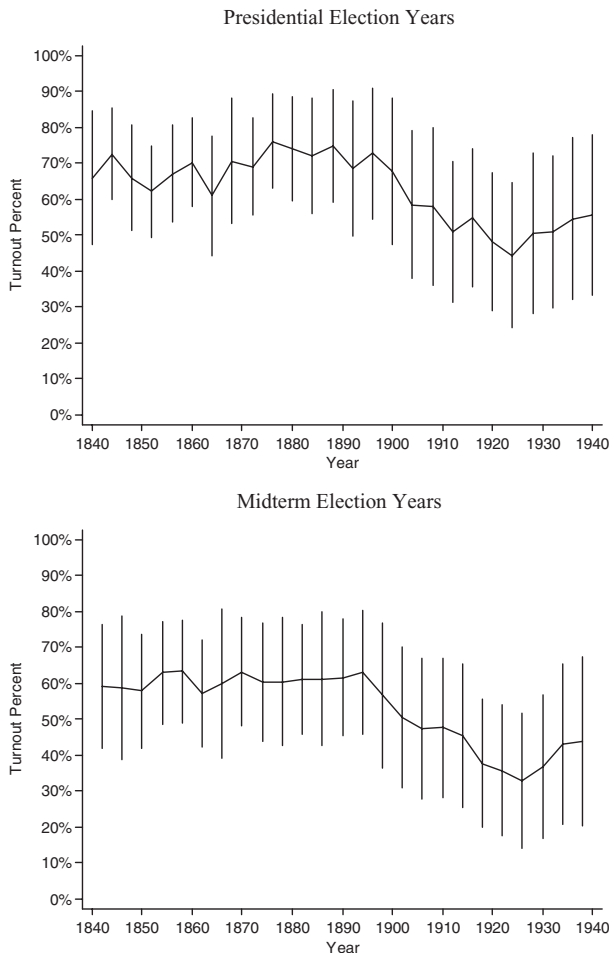
Second, Massachusetts did not follow county borders in constructing any of its House districts. Because of this difficulty Massachusetts is excluded. Third, a few districts combined whole counties and a slice of an adjoining county. Typically this happened when a rural or suburban county abutted a big city. In these cases, I used the turnout percentage of the whole county portion of the district as the turnout percent for the district. This makes the assumption that turnout proportions in the "city" slice of these districts were similar to the other counties in the district. Although not ideal, this was the only available solution. The historical census reports do not report age, sex, or race at the level of minor civil divisions. The lowest level of aggregation is the county. Fortunately this type of district constitutes only a very small number of observations during this period. In sum, I captured turnout results for 93% of the congressional districts over this 100-year period.⁶

In dealing with historical election data, one must also be sensitive to the reliability of turnout numbers. First, the numerator—the number of votes cast—may have been inflated by fraudulent ballots (i.e., repeat voters, deceased voters, etc.). Political historians of the era, however, have found little evidence that fraudulent ballots were widespread enough to alter the overall reliability of turnout data (Argersinger 1992; Burnham 1986; Jensen 1971). A second issue is the denominator—the number of eligible voters. This is an issue of the reliability of historical census numbers. Analyzing results over time, in a panel structure, should help reduce any bias. As long as any systematic errors in the census counts remain uncorrelated with changes in electoral laws then any bias should be minimized.

The analysis begins in 1840 and ends in 1940. The election of 1840 marks the point when reliable electoral data for the entire country become available. It also marks the full flowering of mass-based party competition throughout the nation (Aldrich 1995; Holt 1999; McCormick 1982). Ending in 1940 provides a long enough time frame to estimate the before-and-after consequences of the institutional and political changes of most interest. Moreover, the big drop in turnout had largely leveled off by 1940.

To get an initial idea of the extensive cross-sectional and cross-temporal variation in turnout, Figure 3 displays both the mean and variance of district-level turnout. The

⁶As a robustness check, I have also run the analysis on the original county-level data. These results, presented below in Column 2 of Table 1, closely mirror the district-level results.

FIGURE 3 District-Level Congressional Turnout, 1840–1940

Note: The vertical lines indicate one standard deviation above and below the mean for district-level turnout in congressional elections. The horizontal line indicates the average turnout. The top panel displays presidential election years and the bottom panel midterm election years.

horizontal line displays the over-time trend in the average district-level turnout. The vertical lines display one standard deviation above and below the average for each election. The top and bottom panels present variation in presidential and midterm election years, respectively. The figure reveals considerable over-time variation in district turnout. Between 1870 and 1890, turnout in presidential election years averaged 73.3%. Even during midterm elections, turnout averaged nearly 61%. By the early twentieth century, average turnout had dropped sharply. Between 1920 and 1940, average district turnout dropped to 50.5% and 38.4% in presidential and midterm elections, respectively. The figure also reveals considerable cross-sectional variance in addition to the more well-

known time-series variance. Even during the peak period of turnout there was striking cross-sectional variation in participation rates. For instance, in the 1880 election, one standard deviation below and above the mean level of congressional turnout was 59.3% and 88.6%, respectively.

Turning next to the independent variables, the dummy variables *Office Bloc Ballot* and *Party Column Ballot* capture the impact of ballot reform. Pre-Australian ballot elections serve as the excluded category. To measure the impact of separating presidential from congressional elections, the model included the variable *Off-November*, which is scored 1 for a non-November election and 0 for a November election. To capture differences between presidential and midterms, the *Off-November* variable was interacted with a dummy variable denoting a presidential election year. The expectation is that off-November elections in presidential years will have lower turnout than those synchronized with the presidential contest. Information on the precise date of each state's congressional election comes from Dubin (1998).

To capture changes in district size, the model includes a variable for the number of eligible voters in each district (i.e., *Number of Eligible Voters* = *Number of Votes Cast* / *Turnout%*). The other major expansion in electorate size was the passage of female suffrage laws. The model accordingly includes a dummy variable (*Female Suffrage*) that takes a value of 1 when a state's female population was first allowed to participate in federal elections. Data for this variable come from Keyssar (2000, Table A.20). In addition, one might suspect the impact of female suffrage on turnout to decline over time. As women became more accustomed to voting, the impact of suffrage might have receded. To test for this possibility, the model allows the suffrage coefficient to vary over time. This was done by interacting the female suffrage variable with a variable denoting the number of years since a state had female suffrage.⁷

District competition is measured as the difference in vote percentage between the top two finishers in the congressional race (*District Margin*).⁸ The data on district-level electoral results come from Dubin (1998). A higher

⁷I thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight. Note that because the main effect of the time variable is perfectly collinear with the presence of female suffrage, the main effect of the time variable drops out of the model.

⁸An alternative would be to take the difference in the raw number of votes cast for the winner and runner-up. Cox (1988) argues that using the raw number of votes is theoretically and econometrically appropriate when districts contain equal populations. But in this era districts were far from equal in population. In this case, Cox (1988) recommends using vote percentages rather than raw votes.

value on the competition variable indicates a less competitive district. Thus, the expectation is that this coefficient will be negative—less competition leading to lower turnout. Note that this measure is the margin in the *current* election. Running the analysis using the *previous* margin of victory produced results in the same direction, but the coefficient had a slightly smaller magnitude. This is consistent with the notion that political actors on the ground had a strong sense of the closeness of an upcoming election.

The measure for closeness in presidential elections is the margin between the top two vote recipients within each state.⁹ These data come from Rusk (2001). During presidential election years I used the value in the current election. In midterm elections I used the margin of the presidential results from the previous election (two years prior). Thus, in midterm years, one can think of the previous presidential vote as an indicator of state-level competitiveness.¹⁰ To distinguish the impact of this variable during presidential and off-year elections, the model includes an interaction between the presidential vote margin and a midterm election dummy. The measure of partisan balance in the U.S. House is the absolute difference in the Democratic and Republican (or Whig) share of legislative seats heading into the election.

Finally, the model also includes a dummy variable denoting when a state adopted a personal registration law. Note, however, that some local registration laws were passed before full statewide registration laws. Typically these laws were first implemented in urban areas (Harris 1929). Ideally one would like data pinpointing when each individual district fell under the umbrella of a registration law. Unfortunately, comprehensive data on local registration requirements do not exist. The second-best option, and the one used here, is the passage of a statewide registration law. Data for this variable come from Walker (1972).

Turning next to estimation issues, with time-series cross-section data one must account for the potential of serially correlated errors and panel heteroskedastic-

ity.¹¹ To account for both of these potential issues I estimated the model with Newey-West robust standard errors.¹² These standard errors are robust to both panel heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation (Greene 1997, 506). The Newey-West standard errors are clustered by panel, which here are districts. To account for changes wrought by redistricting, after a redistricting each district becomes a new panel.¹³

In estimating a model with Newey-West standard errors, one must choose a lag length to account for autocorrelation (Greene 1997, 590–91). A Lagrange Multiplier test for serial correlation revealed a maximum lag structure of four periods. Specifically, this test involves running the original model, capturing the residuals, and then regressing the residuals on the lagged residuals along with the other independent variables. Using alternate lag values—either larger or smaller—had no effect on the overall results.

The model also includes state fixed effects to account for any unobserved time-invariant characteristics of states, such as the strength of state party systems, not included in the model.¹⁴ To account for any potential regional heterogeneity in turnout, the model includes regional variables (i.e., East, Midwest, West, and South). To avoid perfect collinearity, the South serves as the excluded category. Because turnout may also have varied across time within these regions, I allow the regional variables

⁹Another option would be to estimate how pivotal, or decisive, a state was in the Electoral College using simulation techniques (e.g., Shachar and Nalebuff 1999; Strömberg 2008). Shachar and Nalebuff (1999) found that the statewide vote margin between the two parties does a nearly identical job in predicting state-level turnout as do more complex simulations of a state's "decisiveness."

¹⁰I have also estimated the model using a multiperiod average of the presidential vote. Using a two-period or three-period average had little effect on the overall results. These results are presented in Columns 6 and 7 of Table A.2 in the supplemental information.

¹¹Another potential problem is cross-sectional dependence. I checked the robustness of the results by estimating the model with Driscoll-Kraay (1998) standard errors, which account for cross-sectional, or spatial, dependence (see also Hoechle 2007). The results, presented in Column 5 of Table A.2 in the supplemental information, were nearly identical to those with Newey-West standard errors. The only minor discrepancy was that the party column variable was significant only at the .10 level. The difference between the office bloc and party column variables, however, remained significant at the .05 level. Another approach would be to incorporate a spatial lag variable directly into the model. Doing so, however, requires first building a spatial weights matrix of the distances between districts. Unfortunately, such a geographic database of congressional districts over this time period does not currently exist.

¹²Panel-corrected standard errors represent another alternative (Beck and Katz 1995). However, because the number of panels (N) dominates the time-series component (T), panel-corrected standard errors are less attractive. Panel-corrected standard errors estimate the full $N \times N$ cross-sectional covariance matrix. This estimate will be imprecise if the ratio between T and N is small, as it is here (Hoechle 2007).

¹³Leaving out elections immediately following a redistricting, shown in Column 2 of Table A.2 in the supplemental information, had no effect on the overall pattern of results. The data on redistricting dates come from Martis (1982).

¹⁴I have also run the model with district-level fixed effects. The results, presented in Column 1 of Table A.2 in the supplemental information, were largely the same.

to vary over time. This was done by interacting each regional variable with a time trend. This flexible estimation strategy therefore controls for both cross-sectional variation across regions and cross-temporal variation within regions.¹⁵

Selection Issues

Despite the considerable research benefits offered by the variation in state electoral institutions, some potential threats to validity remain. In particular, one might worry that the timing and structure of ballot reform were endogenous to turnout rates. Where turnout was already low, party elites may have been more receptive to reform. States with higher turnout, on the other hand, may have been laggards in adopting the ballot.¹⁶

Two separate tests were performed to address the possibility that district-level turnout drove ballot adoption decisions. The first examined whether district-level turnout was associated with the initial adoption of the Australian ballot. This was done by running a logit model with state-level adoption of the ballot as the dependent variable and district-level turnout (lagged by one election) as the independent variable. To adjust for the across-the-board boost in turnout during presidential elections, a dummy variable for a presidential election year was also included. The model also included the margin of victory in the previous election to control for district competitiveness. Each district entered the analysis in 1886—the point at which ballot reform emerged on the national agenda (Fredman 1968; Ware 2002)—and exited once it became covered by an Australian ballot. If turnout had no impact on the timing of ballot reform then the coefficient on lagged turnout should be insignificant. That is what

we find.¹⁷ The coefficient for lagged turnout was small (.004) and insignificant ($p = .66$).

The second test looked at the chosen format of the ballot once states had decided to move to the Australian ballot. The dependent variable indicates whether the state chose the party column ballot or the office bloc (1 = *Party Column*; 0 = *Office Bloc*). Using the same independent variables as above, the lagged turnout coefficient was .02 and insignificant ($p = .28$). Overall, these results provide little support for a direct link between district-level turnout and decisions to adopt the Australian ballot or choose a particular format for the new ballot.

Results

Turning first to the results for the secret ballot, we see a significant negative coefficient for both formats of the Australian ballot (Table 1, Column 1). That the Australian ballot drove down turnout meshes with previous research (Cox and Kousser 1981; Heckelman 1995). What is new and of particular importance, however, is the significant difference between the office bloc and party column ballots. The office bloc reduced turnout by 8.56%, while the party column reduced turnout by a smaller 3.72%. This difference was significant ($p < .01$). These results suggest that the impact of the ballot on mobilization was driven not just by secrecy but also by the expected levels of party loyalty in the voting booth.

To get an idea of the overall role of ballot reform in the decline of turnout, one can multiply the coefficients in Table 1 by the proportion of districts that had the office bloc and the proportion that had a party column ballot. Here I used the proportion of districts that fell under either category in 1940. In this year, 44% of congressional districts fell under the office bloc while 54% used the party column.¹⁸ Based on these proportions, the office bloc and party column ballots reduced turnout by 3.77% and 2.01%, respectively. Together then, as an approximation, ballot reform accounted for a 5.78% total decline in turnout.

The impact on turnout of voting rules extended not just to the physical format of the ballot. The timing of elections also mattered. Turnout in congressional elections held simultaneously with presidential elections was higher than in non-November states. In presidential election years the turnout in off-November states was 4.47% lower than congressional elections synchronized with the

¹⁵Because the regional “main effects” are perfectly collinear with the state-level fixed effects—and hence already accounted for in the model—the regional intercepts fall out of the estimation. As a further check, I reestimated the model with time-invariant regional effects and excluded one state dummy variable from each region. This alternative model produced no impact on the key results of interest.

¹⁶A version of this argument constituted a major plank of Burnham’s (1974) response to Rusk (1974) and Converse (1974) in their debate over the impact of the Australian ballot on split-ticket voting. Rusk and Converse each argued that ballot reform increased split-ticket voting, while Burnham countered that ballot laws, in addition to other Progressive-era reforms, were explicitly fashioned by reformers to heighten split-ticket voting and in effect undermine party machines. Although their disagreement centered on split-ticket voting, a similar logic may apply to turnout.

¹⁷The full set of results is presented in Table A.1 in the supplemental information.

¹⁸Georgia and South Carolina had yet to adopt the Australian ballot.

TABLE 1 Determinants of Congressional Turnout, 1840–1940

<i>DV = District Turnout%</i>	Congressional	
	Districts	Counties
Mobilizing Votes		
Office Bloc Ballot	–8.56(.71)	–5.65(.29)
Party Column Ballot	–3.72(.61)	–3.05(.28)
Pres. Election x Off-November	–4.47(.50)	–5.61(.22)
Pres. Election	11.42(.24)	10.40(.11)
Off-November	.80(.69) ^{ns}	2.80(.31)
# of Eligible Voters ('000s)	–.05(.02)	–.03(.004)
Female Suffrage	–6.81(1.15)	–12.02(.23)
Female Suffrage x Trend	.48(.07)	1.02(.04)
Turning Votes into Seats		
District Margin	–.27(.01)	–.25(.002)
Turning Seats into Control of Government		
Pres. Margin	–.26(.02)	–.24(.008)
Pres. Margin x Midterm Election	.01(.01) ^{ns}	–.02(.006)
U.S. House Closeness	.14(.02) ^{ns}	.05(.007) ^{ns}
The Cost of Voting		
Registration	–1.89(.56)	–2.05(.24)
Regional Variation		
Trend	–.49(.04)	–.61(.02)
East x Trend	.73(.04)	.84(.02)
Midwest x Trend	.60(.04)	.84(.01)
West x Trend	1.28(.09)	1.34(.03)
Constant	55.43(1.77)	82.12(.59)
Adjusted R-Square	.69	.66
Observations	14,077	105,421

Note: State fixed effects included but not reported. Newey-West standard errors, clustered by district, reported in parentheses. ns = not significant at $p < .05$, one-tailed test.

November presidential election. Just as important, there is a larger “surge and decline” in synchronized states. For November states the difference in turnout between presidential and midterm years was 11.42%. For off-November states the difference in turnout between presidential and midterm years was a smaller 6.95%.

Although the turnout surge was larger in synchronized states, one still finds a turnout boost for off-November states in presidential election years. This suggests that off-November states were not immune to the surrounding presidential campaign. At first glance this finding may seem surprising, but it does correspond with some strands of previous research. Kernell and Jacobson's (1987) study of nineteenth-century news in Cleveland, Ohio—an October state until 1886—found

that over 90% of political news coverage during presidential election years was devoted to the presidential campaign. Moreover, in this era before national public opinion polls, the early states, and October states in particular, served as bellwethers for the upcoming November election. This led parties to spend extra effort in the October states in the hope of manufacturing a bandwagon effect heading into the presidential contest (James 2007). Thus, it is not surprising to find a presidential year boost even for off-November states. Nevertheless, the pattern of results is consistent with the argument that mobilization increased when presidential and congressional candidates were elected on the same day.¹⁹

Larger district populations (in terms of eligible voters) also reduced turnout. An increase of 1,000 eligible voters reduced turnout by .05%. It is easier to see the magnitude of the effect by considering the average growth of districts. In 1850 the average district contained 99,000 people; in 1920 it contained 197,000 people. A shift of this magnitude adds up to an estimated 4.9% decline in turnout.

Both the variables for female suffrage and the interaction with time are significant. The initial impact of the expansion of the electorate via female suffrage reduced turnout by 6.81%. But this impact eroded over time, as indicated by the positive interaction between time and female suffrage. These numbers indicate that by 1940 any variation in turnout due to female suffrage had largely evaporated. Overall, the results clearly indicate that variation in the rules governing how votes were conducted and the size of electorates that had to be mobilized played a strong role in shaping turnout.

Turning our attention to how these votes then translated into legislative representation, one finds a relationship between district-level competition and turnout. As suspected, less competitive elections reduced turnout. Every point increase in election margin decreased turnout by .27%. To put this in context, all else being equal, a 15-point decrease in competition—roughly equal to the average decline between 1870 and 1920—would have reduced turnout by 4.1%.

As competition in the presidential contest declined, so did turnout. A unit increase in the statewide presidential margin reduced turnout by .26%. The average state-level margin in presidential races between 1870 and

¹⁹I have also run a model with variables denoting whether there was a gubernatorial and/or U.S. Senate race (post 17th Amendment) at the time of the congressional election. The results are presented in Column 3 of Table A.2 in the supplemental information. The presence of a governor's race significantly increased turnout, although the magnitude of the boost was modest. The Senate variable was insignificant. The other variables were unaffected.

1890 was 6.4%. Between 1920 and 1940, it increased to 14.9%. This increase in presidential margins led to an estimated turnout decline of about 2.2%. The results reveal little difference between presidential and midterm elections in terms of the impact of statewide competition. The interaction between state-level competition and midterm elections was small and not significant.

The coefficient tapping the partisan balance of the U.S. House was in the wrong direction. The results indicated that as the House became less evenly balanced, turnout actually increased slightly. Although not in the expected direction, this relationship is perhaps not too surprising given that any single House race is unlikely to be pivotal in determining majority control. The predominance of the presidential contest in increasing turnout is also consistent with the notion that the presidency was the rallying point of nineteenth-century campaigns (e.g., Kernell and Jacobson 1987; McCormick 1982).

In line with expectations, the costs of voting also appear to have reduced turnout. The imposition of registration requirements decreased turnout by 1.89%. Of course, the variable used here is the adoption of a statewide registration law. More fine-grained data on local adoption of registration might paint a slightly different picture.

Both the trend and regional variables were significant. The stand-alone negative-trend term captures the well-known downward trajectory of turnout in the South. The positive interaction between the trend term and each of the regional variables indicates that turnout did not drop as quickly in the other regions compared to the South, after controlling for institutional changes. As a further check on regional variation, I also ran a model that included a simple trend term and time-invariant regional intercepts. Again the regional intercepts were positive, indicating turnout outside the South was higher on average. In this alternative model the trend term was insignificant. Nevertheless, regardless of how one models regional variation the results show that electoral rules and political competition strongly influenced turnout patterns.

Although the model allows for turnout differences across regions and over time, one might still worry that the changes in turnout within particular regions, such as the South, were overly influencing the results. One way to assess this possibility is to estimate the model using cross-validation (Beck 2001). Here that means dropping one region at a time. For example, I ran the model excluding southern states. I then repeated this for other regions. The results remained consistent across all of these estimations.²⁰

²⁰The full results are presented in Table A.3 of the supplemental information.

As a further check on the robustness of the estimates, Column 2 of Table 1 presents the results of a model with counties as the unit of analysis. The results are largely consistent with those presented at the district level. There were two minor differences worth noting. First, the impact of statewide competition slightly increased during midterm years, as evidenced by the negative coefficient on the interaction between the presidential vote and midterm elections. The magnitude of the coefficient, however, is modest. Second, the size of the coefficient on the female suffrage variable jumped to 12.02%. Yet the interaction with time also increased in size (from .48 to 1.02). Thus, when multiplied out, the total impact of female suffrage in the county model remains similar to the district model. In both estimations, the impact of female suffrage had substantially diminished by 1940.

Up to this point the discussion has focused on the individual contributions of electoral rules and political competition on turnout. To what extent did these factors cumulatively contribute to variation in turnout? To address this question, I estimated a series of equations designed to assess the cumulative impact of electoral institutions and competition. The dependent variable is, as before, district-level turnout. The first equation simply estimated a time trend. The second equation added state and regional intercepts. The third equation added the other independent variables—replicating the model presented in Table 1. The explanatory power rose across the three equations. The trend term by itself explained 13% of the variation in turnout. Adding state and regional effects added to the explanatory power, accounting for 42% of the variation. Finally, adding the institutional and competition variables increased the explanatory power to 69%. Moreover, in the first two equations the trend term was positive and significant with values of .56 and .53, respectively. After adding the institutional and competition variables, the trend term became statistically insignificant. Taken as a whole, the results support an account of changing turnout patterns in which the collective influence of changing rules and declining competition played an important role.

Conclusion: Political Institutions and Electoral Development

Politicians pay attention to those who participate. For this reason, the comparatively low turnout rates of modern American national elections has long troubled and puzzled scholars (e.g., Lijphart 1997; Piven and Cloward 1998). There was a time in American politics, however,

when participation among the eligible electorate was immense. In the period after the Civil War, turnout during presidential election years reached upwards of 75%. Even in off-years, turnout averaged 60%. Yet by the 1920s turnout had plummeted and has never returned to its nineteenth-century heights. At least since Burnham's pioneering 1965 article on nineteenth-century electoral politics, scholars have debated the extent to which changes in electoral rules and declining political competition contributed to this transformative decline in turnout (e.g., Burnham 1965, 1974, 1980; Converse 1974; Cox and Kousser 1981; Kleppner 1982; Kornbluh 2000; McGerr 1986; Rusk 1974).

This article has shown that the legal framework of elections played an important role in shaping turnout both across districts and over time. The combination of party-centric institutions and intense competition, locally and nationally, impelled office-seeking elites to place immense effort in mobilizing voters. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, voters could be more easily identified and monitored; electoral calendars were synchronized; competition in many parts of the country was intense; and party control of national government—in particular, the presidency—often hung in the balance. In short, nineteenth-century turnout was shaped by a confluence of institutional and political forces that provided powerful incentives for office-seeking politicians to get voters to the polls. By the early twentieth century, altered electoral institutions and declining competition led campaigns to turn away from mobilization and toward persuasion.

The consequences for the development of the U.S. Congress were far-reaching. Research into congressional evolution typically focuses on the internal logic that compelled institutional development. Coping with an ever-growing workload (e.g., Polsby 1968), allocating committee slots in response to burgeoning careerism (e.g., Polsby, Gallaher, and Rundquist 1969), and fashioning procedural rules to regulate the legislative process (e.g., Binder 1997; Schickler 2001) are among the prominent explanations advanced for the institutionalization of Congress. Accompanying these internal changes, however, were significant changes in the electoral environment. Less reliant on party leaders to marshal voters to the polls, the job of congressional candidates became *persuading* voters to send them to the Hill. Party machines gave way to home-styles. The consequence was the emergence of self-reliant politicians who were oriented toward their constituency and less toward their party (Cooper 2005; Katz and Sala 1996; Kernell 1977).

These results also remind us of the pervasive impact of political institutions in structuring democratic

elections. The relatively uniform and stable electoral laws of contemporary American politics can lead observers to understate how electoral institutions fashion and channel democratic participation. By looking back across time, however, one can better discern the pervasive impact of electoral rules. Where rules changed—when calendars were synchronized, when ballot formats were reworked—turnout followed. Thus, to explain patterns of turnout one must account for electoral rules.

As such, these results imply that contemporary recipes to boost voter turnout may be missing a critical ingredient. Lowering the costs of participation (e.g., motor voter laws) is certainly a noble idea, but from a historical perspective their (so far) minimal effects on turnout are not entirely surprising (Keyssar 2000). The evidence presented here suggests that lowering the individual costs of voting may be necessary but not sufficient to raise turnout levels. For those looking to boost turnout, creating stronger incentives for politicians, parties, and other political groups to bring people to the polls may be just as important as lowering the costs of voting.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Table A.1: Estimating the Impact of Turnout on Adoption of the Australian Ballot

Table A.2: Alternative Specifications

Table A.3: Cross-Validating Regions

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