

Evidence from Norway suggests that a rise in turnout not only benefits centre-left parties, but can also benefit the radical right

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*High turnout in European elections has often been assumed to favour parties on the left of the political spectrum, based on the assumption that they derive their support primarily from working class voters. **Henning Finseraas** and **Kåre Vernby** argue that this principle may no longer be valid due to the existence of new parties on the left and right of party systems, such as radical right parties which appeal to those in lower socio-economic groups. Using data from Norway, they illustrate that the right-wing Progress Party appears to benefit from high turnout as much as Norway's centre-left Labour Party, while the country's Socialist Left Party loses support when turnout rises.*



Low levels of citizen participation in politics have long been seen as a serious democratic problem, and a possible relationship between turnout and election outcomes is a prominent topic of discussion in political science. The most frequent claim is that left-of-centre parties will benefit systematically from higher levels of turnout since many of them are disproportionately supported by groups on the lower end of the socio-economic scale, such as the unemployed or low wage earners.



In two-party systems, this relationship between turnout and election outcomes has received some empirical support, yet the evidence is not conclusive. In multiparty systems, the evidence is less

clear and a potential relationship is likely to depend on the specifics of the party system and party competition in each country. In particular, most West European countries have witnessed the establishment and subsequent growth of 'New Left' and 'New Right' parties. Electoral support for New Left parties does not come primarily from the lower socio-economic groups that have been the main constituency of traditional social-democratic parties. By contrast, support for 'radical right' parties often does. Thus, to the degree that increases in turnout imply that more voters from lower socio-economic groups show up at the polls, we would expect some left-of-centre parties to benefit, while others would suffer, and similarly on the right.



Old ballot box, Selje, Norway
Credit: Thomas Bjørkan (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

In a [recent study](#), we show that Norway is one country in which changes in turnout are likely to be a mixed blessing for the left. In Norway, the anti-immigration

Progress Party on the right competes with Labour for support from those in lower socio-economic groups, while the voter profile of the Socialist Left fits the New Left label. Thus, we would expect that a sudden shift in voter turnout due to more voters from lower socio-economic groups showing up at the polls would benefit the Labour party and the Progress Party, while the Socialist Left Party would suffer.

The key empirical challenge in this type of research is to isolate the effect of turnout from the myriad of other factors that operate in an election. To be able to do so we study the introduction and removal of a reform of early voting which made it possible to vote early at the local post office. The reform reduced the costs of voting and led to a

massive increase in early voting. The reform did not simply substitute election-day voting for early voting. In fact, survey data estimates suggest that the reform increased total turnout by about two percentage points.

The reduction in the costs of voting was larger in rural areas, and in line with this we found that increases in turnout were larger in rural areas. Moreover, we found that individuals with lower levels of education were mobilised by the reform, in particular in rural areas. The characteristics and the geographical impact of the reform allows for a research design where we examine the trends in turnout and election outcomes before and after the reform, and how the trends depend on the type of municipality. Since the reform changed turnout more in rural areas, but had little impact in urban population centers, we can use this variation to estimate the impact of turnout on party vote shares.

The empirical results are consistent with several of our expectations. In particular, the trends in the vote share of the Labour party and the Progress Party were significantly stronger in areas where turnout increased. Compared to the average municipality, Labour's vote share decreased by about 0.8 percentage points more in municipalities where turnout did not increase, compared to the most rural municipalities. The Progress Party's vote share trend was negative, yet this trend was a lot more pronounced in urban municipalities where there were no positive effects of the reform on turnout.

Similarly, our results for the Socialist Left party are also as expected. They deviated negatively from the municipal trend in those areas where the reform had the most impact on turnout. In particular, their vote share increased about 0.4 percentage points more in urban areas with no increase in turnout, compared to the most rural areas. When we use the reform-induced geographical variation in turnout to estimate the effect of turnout, we find that a one percentage point increase in turnout causes the vote share of Labour to rise by an estimated 0.9 percentage points. The corresponding figure for the Progress party is about 0.8 percentage points. The Socialist Left and the Conservative Party, on the other hand, suffer from higher levels of turnout.

How generalisable are our results? Since our research strategy builds on the geographical variation in our estimates, they are directly informative about the effects of changes in turnout on election outcomes in rural areas, and generalisability to urban areas depends on how different the rural and urban non-voters are. The reform led to a broad decrease in the cost of voting and in this sense it is similar to other reforms that alter the costs or benefits for a broad segment of the population, such as [motor voter programmes](#) or compulsory voting.

What about external validity beyond the Norwegian context? The Norwegian case is similar to most other Western democracies in that voter turnout is biased against the participation of lower socio-economic groups. It is also similar to other Western multiparty democracies in that there exists a New Right party as well as a New Left party. Indeed, we find suggestive evidence from the most recent parliamentary elections in Western European countries are consistent with some of the patterns we find in the Norwegian case: New Right parties do better in elections with a high level of turnout, while New Left parties do worse. Still, we do warn against overgeneralizing our results. Rather, we hope that the issue of external validity will be addressed by additional internally valid studies in the future.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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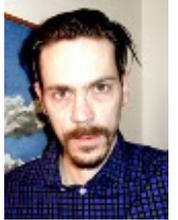
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