

Studies of turnout as a 'habit' seem to overestimate the significance of self-perpetuation of electoral participation

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Electoral participation is frequently discussed as a 'habit' formed during a citizen's young adulthood but there is debate over how this develops. In a recent [study](#), **Maciej A. Górecki** explored the mechanism that lies behind the process of 'habit formation'. His findings challenge ideas that voting habits are shaped by early experience of participating in elections, and instead support theories that they are more closely associated with 'social maturation'.*



The developmental model of voter turnout has recently become one of the prominent explanations of electoral participation phenomena. Not without controversy, a growing number of electoral behaviour students speak of electoral participation (and indeed abstention) in terms of a 'habit' or, more precisely, a permanent disposition formed during a citizen's young adulthood. Having been formed, the 'habit' remains virtually unchangeable and immune to various influences.

A question remains, however, as to how exactly such a disposition forms. Two alternatives are considered by existing literature. The first of them, which tends to be implicitly or explicitly favoured by the vast majority of the studies of 'habitual voting', maintains that voting tends to be a self-perpetuating act and that the fact that one participates in an election today causes one to be more likely to vote in future. A 'habit' is thus formed in the course of one's 'experiencing' the initial elections in which one is eligible to vote. Various mechanisms have been proposed for this. For example, casting a ballot for the first time might eliminate the most mundane barriers to future participation, such as the necessity of registration or finding a polling place. First-time voting might also have deeper psychological consequences, with voters starting to view themselves as 'good citizens' recognising the importance of their own contribution to the democratic process.

The second explanation, put forward by Eric Plutzer in his classic study '[Becoming a habitual voter](#)', relies on the notion of 'social ageing'. In this view, the newly enfranchised young adults usually have few 'resources', broadly conceived, which would allow them to overcome the initial 'costs' of electoral participation. They thus tend to start as non-voters but, in most cases, they are able to outgrow the 'habit' of abstention. This occurs because the 'resource pool' available to those young people increases as they age. For instance, they establish families and have children

in school which makes certain public policies more relevant from their viewpoint. They might also buy a permanent home and become attached more strongly to a particular local community, another factor that has a positive impact on one's propensity to participate in elections. All these 'resources' tend to accumulate during one's young adulthood and stabilise thereafter. A transition from non-voting to voting in the course of young adulthood is thus a fairly natural phenomenon whereas subsequent disruptions of the 'habit' of participation are relatively rare. A stable predisposition to vote or (rarely) abstain forms but it does not result from one's experience of past elections ('electoral experience' in the language of the 'habitual voting' concept) and the self-perpetuation of turnout. Rather, it is an outcome of a process originating essentially beyond the domain of elections and having its roots in young people's 'social maturation' as they get older.

The above controversy as to what mechanism lies behind the process of 'habit formation' in electoral participation seems to be conceptually crucial but a solution to it is not easy to find. A major obstacle is posed by the fact of an inevitable and nearly perfect coincidence of the processes of gaining experience with elections and 'social ageing'. For a certain amount of time has to pass if a person is to gain considerable 'electoral experience', and the passage of time means ageing. In my [recent study](#), I refer to the Swiss case in an attempt to disentangle empirically the above two phenomena. I rely on the fact of the late enfranchisement of Swiss women, who were only granted voting rights in 1971, and the availability of the Swiss Electoral Studies data from the 1971 National Council election. I thus analyse voting patterns for women who were enfranchised at a relatively old age rather than in young adulthood. I compare those patterns with voting regularities observed for both men and younger women who were enfranchised at a young age, at the same time as the men.

I found that there was no distinctive turnout pattern for the women enfranchised late in their lives. There is thus virtually no evidence to support the hypothesis positing that turnout regularities are conditioned by the fact of one having or not having experienced elections in the past. At the same time, I find suggestive evidence for the presence of the mediating effects of age and thereby supporting the 'social ageing' hypothesis. If this is the case, it can be tentatively concluded that 'habit formation' in electoral participation is unlikely to be a phenomenon related exclusively to the electoral process and young citizens' 'experience' of it.

The bulk of the existing studies of turnout as a 'habit' might thus have overestimated the importance of the processes of self-perpetuation of turnout, especially as the effects tend to be rather weak, even if previous studies have found them in diverse contexts. Future studies of turnout as a 'habit' should thus perhaps return to the original Plutzer's concept by giving due attention to the processes of 'social ageing'.

*This post is based on Dr Górecki's recent *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* article "Age, experience and the contextual determinants of turnout: A deeper look at the process of habit formation in electoral participation" (full article [here](#)). It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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