

Divided Government and Voter Turnout in Gubernatorial Elections

**Juliana Menasce Horowitz
Department of Government and Politics
University of Maryland
jmenasce@gvpt.umd.edu
301-314-2733**

Divided Government and Voter Turnout in Gubernatorial Elections

Introduction

American politics scholars have sought for decades to develop a theory to explain the low levels of political participation in the United States. Despite acknowledging that there are many other noteworthy ways to engage in politics, scholars often use voter turnout as a measure of political engagement. Low voter turnout has typically been explained as a function of institutional barriers such as strict registration requirements (Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978; Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987; Piven and Cloward 1988), attitudinal variables such as one's sense of political efficacy (Campbell et al. 1960; Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Plutzer 2002), and socioeconomic factors, like education, income, and occupation (Campbell et al. 1960; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Teixeira 1992; Jewell and Morehouse 2001). One institutional characteristic of the American political system, divided party control of government made possible by the constitutional provision of separation of powers, however, has been largely ignored in the voting behavior literature. In this paper I ask "To what extent does divided government increase or decrease political participation?" To answer this question I analyze the effect of two-party control of state government versus one-partyism on voter turnout in gubernatorial elections.

Much of the research on the causes and consequences of divided government, such as studies conducted by Key (1949, 1956), Campbell et al. (1966), Mayhew (1991), Fiorina (1996), and Petrocik and Doherty (1996), has sought to explain the motivation behind split-ticket voting and other potential causes of divided government and to analyze the effectiveness of policy-makers under divided and unified governments.

Indeed, the questions raised by such studies are essential to our understanding of the virtues and shortcomings of the American political system, which allows for divided control of government. Yet, as divided government becomes increasingly the norm in the American states (Fiorina 1994), the literature on divided government must be expanded to address the effect, if any, of this aspect of the American political system on voter turnout. Voting is the most effective way for citizens to communicate their wants and needs to political elites as well as the government's major source of democratic legitimacy (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Teixeira 1992). I expect to find that voters turnout at higher rates in gubernatorial elections when the governorship and the legislature of their state are not controlled by the same party.

Two-Party Government, One-Partyism, and Turnout

In the only study of its kind, Franklin and Hirczy (1998) show that whether a government is divided or unified is a strong predictor of voter turnout. Using turnout data from presidential elections between 1840 and 1992, Franklin and Hirczy (1998) find that turnout is higher in elections that take place under a unified government in which the same party controls both the executive and the legislative branches. Their argument relies primarily on the notion that unified government, unlike divided government, does not leave any doubt as to which party is responsible for accomplishments and failures in policy-making (Jacobson 1990; Mayhew 1991; Fiorina 1996), thus motivating voters to go to the polls to reward or punish the party they hold accountable. Moreover, Franklin and Hirczy (1998) argue, by stressing accountability, unified government makes policy preferences among candidates of competing parties more distinguishable to voters, intensifying the perceived salience of the contest and, in turn, boosting turnout.

Petrocik and Doherty (1996) and Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002), however, suggest that policy proximity between a Democratic and Republican candidate may, in fact, boost voter participation. In their analysis of what motivates split-ticket voting, Petrocik and Doherty (1996) put forth the theory that people split their vote between competing parties to neutralize the more extremist voices in each party. Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan's (2002) study of congressional voting behavior shows that Americans are becoming increasingly less committed to ideological partisanship and that constituents punish members of Congress who vote with the more extreme wing of their parties. Therefore, divided government may be desirable to the American voter, who will not only be comforted by the checks placed on the most extreme elements of each party but will also be more likely to find candidates whose views are consistent with his or her own.

Moreover, divided government is a key component of party competition, which several studies of state politics have shown to have a strong positive effect on the mobilization of the electorate in state and national elections (Hofstetter 1973; Ranney 1976; Patterson and Caldeira 1983; Hill and Leighley 1993; Jewell and Morehouse 2001). When the two major parties have an even chance of winning elections, potential voters will be more inclined to believe that their vote can make a difference. While divided government is not synonymous with party competition, it is often included in calculations of party competition such as the Ranney index, the most widely used measure of party competition. The Ranney index factors in how long the governorship and each house of a state's legislature were under Democratic control in a given period

(Ranney 1976). Two-party control of a state's government, even if only for one election cycle, is indicative of some competition, albeit temporary.

Finally, media coverage of political events increases during periods of divided government because there is often more controversy and more sides to be heard (Nicholson and Segura 1999). Media coverage cuts the information costs associated with voting by providing accessible, non-technical information about government officials, candidates, and political issues, which in turn boosts turnout (Teixeira 1992). Nicholson and Segura (1999) argue that media coverage of divided government at the national level depresses turnout, since citizens will receive mixed messages from the two camps and will, therefore, feel less able to make judgments. Yet, at the state level, the mere fact that government officials receive more media exposure under divided government, regardless of the messages they convey, may be enough to pique the interest of an electorate that typically has little knowledge of the activities of their state legislatures.

Hypothesis

Based on the propositions outlined above regarding the link between divided government and increased media coverage of political events, party competition, and political moderation, I expect voter turnout to be higher in gubernatorial elections following a period of divided government. This hypothesis contradicts Franklin and Hirczy's (1998) finding that when the national government is under two-party control voter turnout in presidential elections decreases. Franklin and Hirczy (1998) point out that, since the 1960s, the national government has seen extended periods of divided control along with a significant decline in voter turnout rates. While divided government may, in fact, account for the drop in turnout since the 1960s, the Twenty-sixth

Amendment, which gave 18-year-olds the right to vote in 1971, is likely to be responsible for a significant share of the decline. Kleppner (1982) shows that about one quarter of the decline in the nation's turnout in the late-1960s and early-1970s can be attributed to the inclusion of some 25 million 18- to 20-year-olds in the electorate.

Data and Methods

In order to test the hypothesis that divided state government boosts participation I look at voter turnout in gubernatorial elections taking place in non-presidential election years from 1970 to 1998. Gubernatorial elections that coincide with presidential elections have been excluded because increased media attention and voter interest in presidential elections consistently translate into increased participation in state and local elections, thus making it sometimes difficult to distinguish between the effect of national and state political trends on turnout (Jewell and Morehouse 2001). I start by analyzing individual-level data to assess whether voters are more likely to turnout under divided government. I then turn to aggregate-level data to measure the effect of divided government on state turnout rates.

Individual-level Data

I have created a dataset which combines individual-level data on voter turnout in gubernatorial elections, demographics, interest in the election, and perceived sense of efficacy with measures of divided government, party competition, and voter registration regulations in each respondent's state.

The dependent variable, *turnout*, as well as control variables that have been established in the political behavior literature as having significant effect on turnout, come from the NES 1948-2000 Cumulative Data File for the years indicated above.

Thirty-six states held gubernatorial elections in non-presidential years from 1970-1998. Only respondents who reside in those states have been included. Approximately 3,000 cases were dropped from the dataset because the respondents were 17 years old and, therefore, not eligible to vote. In the NES survey, respondents are asked if they voted in the gubernatorial election and, if so, for whom they voted. Answers are coded 1, 2, and 3 for Democrat, Republican, and other respectively, and 9 if the respondent did not vote or does not remember if he or she voted. I have recoded the variables so that it simply reflects whether or not the respondent voted, regardless of which party received the vote.

The independent variable, *divided government*, has been constructed from election data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. For each gubernatorial election year, states were coded 0 if the same party gained control of the governorship and both houses of the state legislature and 1 if a party other than the one controlling the governorship controlled at least one house of the state legislature. The variable was then lagged and combined with the turnout data to indicate whether a state's government was divided or unified in the electoral term prior to each election. In addition, the folded Ranney index score of party competition (Ranney 1976) has been calculated for each of the thirty-six states for three election cycles and, again, lagged to indicate the political environment of the respondent's state in the twelve years prior to each election. The index includes measures of government control, percentage of the Democratic vote for governor, and percentage of Democratic seats in the state lower and upper houses.

Finally, a number of factors typically associated with turnout have been included as control variables. The control variables for this analysis have been chosen based on

findings in key studies in political behavior conducted by Campbell et al. (1960), Rosenstone and Wolfinger (1978, 1980), Abramson and Aldrich (1982), Kleppner (1982), Piven and Cloward (1988), and Teixeira (1992). Every major study finds that socioeconomic status, as measured by *income* and *education*, affects voter turnout. Likewise, one's *race*, *age group*, and *marital status* also influence whether or not one votes. Blacks typically vote at lower rates than whites. The young tend to be less interested in political participation than older Americans. Those who are married turnout in larger numbers because they feel more socially connected. *Sex* has also been shown to be associated with turnout, but, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) find, with women increasingly being given the same educational opportunities as men, the significance of sex has declined. I include sex as a control variable due to the importance it has been given in the political behavior literature. Other control variables are *political efficacy*, indicated by whether or not the respondent believes the government is responsive and whether or not the respondent believes his or her vote matters, *strength of partisanship*, *interest*, measured by whether or not the respondent has a general interest in public affairs, differences in registration requirements across states, indicated by how many days prior to the election one must register to vote (*registration closing date*), and *closeness of the election*.

The first step of the analysis consists of a series of crosstabulations to establish whether there is a link between divided government and voter turnout, controlling for each of the demographic and efficacy variables outlined above. Then, a logit analysis will be conducted to determine whether living in a state in which there is divided government improves the likelihood that a respondent will vote.

Aggregate-level Data

To complement the individual-level analysis I have built a dataset containing state-level measures of turnout, party competition, electoral competition, divided government, and demographic characteristics that are often associated with turnout for the 36 states that held gubernatorial elections in non-presidential years between 1970 and 1998.¹ The political environment variables—lagged party competition, lagged divided government, closeness of the election, and registration closing date—are the same as those used in the logit analysis. One additional political variable has been included to indicate whether or not the state held senatorial elections in the years in question. This allows us to control for the potential effect of national political trends on gubernatorial election turnout. *Percent black*, *percent unemployed*, and *percent college educated* are added to the model due to the attention race, employment status, and education receive in the political participation literature. Turnout will be regressed on the independent variables discussed above. The appropriate tests have been performed to ensure that there is no multicollinearity between any two variables included in the model.² An interaction term was added to measure the effect of divided government coupled with party competition on turnout. Since the interaction term does not yield statistically significant results, it has been left out of the discussion. Again, I expect this analysis, as well as the individual-level analysis, to show a positive relationship between two-party control of government and voter turnout in gubernatorial elections.

¹ Data have been gathered from the following sources: *The Statistical Abstract of the United States*, *The Book of the State*, *America Votes*, and the *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* Data Resources.

² The highest VIF score is 1.5.

Findings

Crosstabulations

A simple bivariate crosstabulation shows that a larger percentage of respondents reports having voted in gubernatorial elections in states in which the election followed a period of divided government than in states in which one-party control preceded the election. The analysis shows the relationship between divided government and voter turnout to be statistically significant.³ However, the difference between the percentages of respondents who voted under unified government versus divided government is small. In states in which one party controlled the governorship and both houses of the state legislature, 50.5% of respondents voted in the gubernatorial election, contrasted with 54.7% of those in states in which the governorship and at least one house of the state legislature were controlled by different parties. When control variables are included in the study in a series of three-way crosstabulations, the relationship between divided government and turnout remains statistically significant in most cases and loses its significance in a few. As predicted, in every instance, the percentage of respondents who voted is higher in states with two-party control than in states with one-party control of government.

The difference between turnout under divided and unified control is most pronounced among those in the 65-74 age group, in which the percentage of those who reported having voted is ten points higher under divided government than it is under unified government. Interestingly, there is also a marked difference among those with less than a high school degree, with 47.3% of respondents who live in divided states saying they voted in the gubernatorial election versus 39% of those in unified state. In

³ Statistical significance indicated by $P \leq .05$ for Chi-Square and Cramer's V tests.

most other instances, the difference is substantively small. The relationship between divided government and turnout loses its statistical significance completely when income and whether or not one thinks his or her vote matters are used as control variables.

Logit Analysis

Two logit models have been included in the analysis. In the first model, the control variables are the same demographic and efficacy measures used in the crosstabulation analysis plus three political environment variables: party competition, closeness of the election, and registration closing date. The second model, following Franklin and Hirzky's (1998), only includes the political environment variables. Unlike the crosstabulation analysis, the logit analysis shows divided government to be statistically insignificant in predicting the probability that a respondent will vote in gubernatorial elections in both models. Of the significant variables in the first model—party competition, sex, age group, income, education level, whether or not the respondent believes his or her vote matters, and interest in public affairs—party competition increases the respondents' likelihood of voting the most. Those in the most competitive states are 23 times more likely to vote than those in the least competitive states in the first model and 16 times more likely in the second model. Curiously, closeness of the election is not statistically significant, suggesting that long-term party competition has a stronger effect on whether or not people vote than short-term, election-specific trends.

In the second model, party competition, closeness of the election, and registration closing date are significant. Divided government, however, remains insignificant. Closing date and closeness of the election, which are shown to be insignificant in the first model, become both statistically and substantively significant in the second model. The

probability that a respondent will vote when registration is either not required or when Election Day registration is allowed is 18 percentage points higher than in the states in which voters must register 50 days prior to the election. The most competitive gubernatorial elections improve the likelihood that a respondent will vote by 16 percentage points.

(TABLE 1)

Regression Analysis

The aggregate-level analysis, in which turnout is regressed on a series of independent variables discussed earlier in the paper confirms the results of the individual-level analysis. Contrary to my expectations, divided government is neither a statistically nor substantively significant predictor of turnout in gubernatorial elections. Of the eight independent variables included in the regression, only four are statistically significant. The four significant variables are closeness of the election, closing date of registration, percent unemployment, and percent black. Interestingly, voter turnout increases significantly as a state's unemployment rate goes up. This indicates that economic trends are more salient to voters than whether or not their state's government is unified or divided.

(TABLE 2)

Discussion

The literature on divided government suggests that two-party control of government has a bearing on the effectiveness of policy-makers (Campbell et al. 1966; Fiorina 1996; Franklin and Hirczy 1998), forces parties to abandon extremism (Petrocik and Doherty 1996), and boosts media coverage of political events (Nicholson and Segura

1999). Yet, despite playing a large role in shaping the political environment of a state, divided state government does not seem to alter turnout in gubernatorial elections significantly in either direction. The finding that divided state government has little to no effect on voter turnout in gubernatorial elections may be indicative of the low level of interest in state politics among the electorate. It may be that most Americans are not aware of which party controls their state upper and lower houses. It is possible that potential voters do not pay enough attention to state politics to know what bills the state legislature has enacted, or failed to enact, as a result of one- or two-party control. Increased media coverage of political events under divided government only increases people's knowledge if they think state politics matters and, therefore, that it is worth their time to read the extra newspaper article or to sit through a few more minutes of the news before changing the channel.

If, indeed, the weak relationship between divided government and voter turnout stems from a belief among Americans that state politics does not matter, the findings of this study have serious implications for democracy in the states. The federalist system gives state governments great power to enact their own public policies as well as to execute federal laws. Much of the research on state policy-making focuses on the impact of political elites, socioeconomic measures, and demographic characteristics on the differences in policy outputs across the states (see Dawson and Robinson 1963; Lewis-Beck 1977; Peterson 1995). If citizens act as if state politics does not matter, state legislators are given a blank check to govern primarily as they, their parties, and interest groups wish, without much electoral accountability.

The results presented in this paper might, however, indicate that divided government has no effect on the political environment and policy outputs in the states. Winters (1976) presents some evidence that shifts in party control do not lead to drastic changes in states' redistributive policies. This could shed some light on why party control does not have a significant impact on voter turnout. If there is no significant difference in the way politics and policy-making are conducted under one- and two-party control of state government, fluctuations in voter turnout rates should not be contingent on party control.

Conclusion

In the pages above, I have offered a theoretical framework for the hypothesis that divided state government boosts turnout in gubernatorial elections. Because two-party control of government has been associated with party competition, increased media coverage of political events, and political moderation, I theorized that divided government would give potential voters the sense that their vote matters, in addition to cutting the costs of obtaining political information and producing moderate politicians who are more attuned to what the public wants. Contrary to my prediction, the three different analyses presented in this paper show that the link between divided state government and voter turnout is substantively weak and, for the most part, statistically insignificant. More research is needed to explain whether divided control of government has little to no impact on turnout due to voters' apathy toward state politics or due to insignificant changes in state politics and policy-making under divided and unified control of government.

Appendix A

States Included in the Study

Alabama	Minnesota
Alaska	Nebraska
Arizona	Nevada
Arkansas	New Hampshire
California	New Mexico
Colorado	New York
Connecticut	Ohio
Florida	Oklahoma
Georgia	Oregon
Hawaii	Pennsylvania
Idaho	Rhode Island
Illinois	South Carolina
Iowa	South Dakota
Kansas	Tennessee
Maine	Texas
Maryland	Vermont
Massachusetts	Wisconsin
Michigan	Wyoming

Appendix B

Minimum and Maximum Values of Variables Included in Logit Model

Divided government: min. = unified; max. = divided

Party competition: min. = .563 (least competitive); max. = .999 (most competitive)

Registration closing date: min. = 0; max. = 50

Closeness of the election: min. = .1 percentage points; max. = 74.5 percentage points

Race: min. = black; max. = white

Sex: min. = male; max. = female

Age group: min. = 18-24; max. = 65+

Marital status: min. = married; max. = not married

Income: min. = 0-16 percentile; max. = 96-100 percentile

Education level: min. = less than high school; max. = college or more

Government cares what R thinks: min. = does not care; max. = does care

R's vote matters: min. = does not matter; max. = does matter

Interest in public affairs: min. = hardly at all; max. = most of the time

Bibliography

- Abramson, Paul R. and John H. Aldrich. 1982. "The Decline of Electoral Participation in America." *American Political Science Review* 76 (September): 502-521.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1966. *Elections and the Political Order*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Canes-Wrone, Brandice, David W. Brady, and John F. Cogan. 2002. "Out of Step, Out of Office: Electoral Accountability and House Members' Voting." *American Political Science Review* 96 (March): 127-140.
- Dawson, Richard E. and James A. Robinson. 1963. "Inter-Party Competition, Economic Variables, and Welfare Policies in the American States." *The Journal of Politics* 25 (May): 265-289.
- Fiorina, Morris. 1996. *Divided Government*, 2nd ed. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Fiorina, Morris. 1994. "Divided Government in the American States: A Byproduct of Legislative Professionalism?" *American Political Science Review* 88 (June): 304-316.
- Franklin, Mark N. and Wolfgang P. Hirczy. 1998. "Separated Powers, Divided Government, and Turnout in U.S. Presidential Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 42 (January): 316-326.
- Hill, Kim Quaile and Jan E. Leighley. 1993. "Party Ideology, Organization, and Competitiveness as Mobilizing Forces in Gubernatorial Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (November): 1158-1178.
- Hofstetter, C. Richard. 1973. "Inter-Party Competition and Electoral Turnout: The Case of Indiana." *American Journal of Political Science* 17 (May): 351-366.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 1990. *The Electoral Origins of Divided Government: Competition in U.S. House Elections, 1946-1988*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Jewell, Malcolm E. and Sarah M. Morehouse. 2001. *Political Parties and Elections in American States*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Key, Jr., V.O. 1956. *American State Politics: An Introduction*. New York: Alfred A.

Knopf.

Key, Jr., V.O. 1949. *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Kleppner, Paul. 1982. *Who Voted? The Dynamics of Electoral Turnout, 1870-1980*. New York: Praeger.

Lewis-Beck, Michael S. 1977. "The Relative Importance of Socioeconomic and Political Variables for Public Policy." *The American Political Science Review* 71 (June): 559-566.

Mayhew, David R. 1991. *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations, 1946-1990*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Nicholson, Stephen P. and Gary M. Segura. 1999. "Midterm Elections and Divided Government: An Information-Driven Theory of Electoral Volatility." *Political Research Quarterly* 52 (September): 609-629.

Petrocik, John R. and Joseph Doherty. 1996. "The Road to Divided Government: Paved Without Intention." In *Divided Government: Change, Uncertainty, and the Constitutional Order*. Eds. Peter F. Galderisi, Roberta Q. Herzberg, and Peter McNamara. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Piven, Frances Fox and Richard A. Cloward. 1988. *Why Americans Don't Vote*. New York: Pantheon.

Patterson, Samuel C. and Gregory A. Caldeira. 1983. "Getting Out the Vote: Participation in Gubernatorial Elections." *The American Political Science Review* 77 (September): 675-689.

Peterson, Paul E. 1995. *The Price of Federalism*. Washington, DC: Brookings.

Plutzer, Eric. 2002. "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources and Growth in Young Adulthood." *American Political Science Review* 96 (March): 41-56.

Ranney, Austin. 1976. "Parties in State Politics." In *Politics in the American States*, 3rd ed. Eds. Herbert Jacob and Kenneth N. Vines. Boston: Little & Brown.

Rosenstone, Steven J. and Raymond E. Wolfinger. 1978. "The Effect of Registration Laws on Voter Turnout." *American Political Science Review* 64 (March): 22-45.

Teixeira, Ruy A. 1992. *The Disappearing American Voter*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

Squire, Peverill, Raymond E. Wolfinger, and David P. Glass. 1987. "Residential Mobility and Voter Turnout." *American Political Science Review* 81 (March): 45-65.

Winters, Richard. 1976. "Party Control and Policy Change." *American Journal of Political Science* 20 (November): 597-636.

Wolfinger, Raymond E. and Steven J. Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes?* New Haven: Yale University Press.

TABLE 1. Change in Predicted Probability of Voting in Gubernatorial Elections

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	MODEL 1	MODEL 2
Divided government	-0.02	0.00
Party competition	0.23**	0.16**
Registration closing date	-0.05	-0.18**
Closeness of the election	0.04	-0.16**
Race	0.02	n/a
Sex	0.05*	n/a
Age	0.32**	n/a
Marital status	-0.01	n/a
Income	0.16**	n/a
Education level	0.22**	n/a
Government cares what R thinks	0.00	n/a
R's vote matters	0.29**	n/a
Interest in public affairs	0.21**	n/a
N	10,734	

**p ≤ .001; *p ≤ .05; see Appendix B for min. and max. values for each variable.

**TABLE 2. Unstandardized Coefficients for
Turnout in Gubernatorial Elections**

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES		
Divided government	-0.335	(.304)
Party competition	5.308	(4.721)
Registration closing date	-0.117**	(.039)
Closeness of the election	-0.098**	(.030)
Senatorial elections	0.921	(.893)
Percent black	-0.603**	(.060)
Percent unemployed	0.748**	(.211)
Percent college or more	0.083	(.095)
Constant	43.211**	(4.823)
	Adj. R ²	0.438
	N	286

Standard error in parentheses.

**p ≤ .001.