

**Understanding Turnout in Canada and the United States:
What Data Do We Lack?**

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Introduction¹

Nearly a century ago, Charles Merriam (1921) decried the lack of good data for political scientists. Indeed, in that pre-Internet, pre-ICPSR, pre-photocopying, pre-computer era, the gathering of data was an enormous challenge. Analyzing it properly was impossible for most researchers: They lacked the training. Even when faculty had the requisite skills, there were not enough graduate student assistants cranking mechanical calculators to get the job done in a reasonable time. And virtually no one had the money to pay them in any case.² Merriam noted the underfunding of social scientists relative to their natural science colleagues, and he looked to the day when sufficient public and private funds might be available to take on the scientific study of politics. Until then, he said, “we limp where we might run” (Merriam 1921, 175, 176).

By the twenty-first century, many of these problems had been solved. Political data of all kinds are widely disseminated, astonishing computing power is available even to high school students, and the mathematical and statistical training of graduate students is greatly improved in every serious political science department. Undergraduates now carry out, just in an afternoon, intensive analyses that would have staggered the semester-long capacities of the great departments of Merriam’s day. All this is real progress.

Yet with the advances in our data sets and our tools has come a realization, one that Merriam grasped but which often escaped other behavioral visionaries and pioneers. The sheer accumulation of political data does us little good. The politically naïve application of the explanatory framework or statistical methodology or experimental technique *du jour* also fails to solve our problems. We need data and research tools that match our substantive understanding, an understanding often developed from studying history or employing other qualitative research tools (Merriam 1921, 179-180). On that score, much remains to be done to fulfill Merriam’s vision. Even if one confines one’s reading to those researchers with legitimate political science training and real political understanding, one need not read long in their work to find them frankly admitting that they do not really have the data they need for the propositions they want to test.

One political science topic that illustrates these problems in dramatic fashion is voter turnout. The amount of data available to researchers is not a problem. Survey data on turnout have appeared in abundance in most advanced democracies, often extending back 25 or even 50 years.

¹ I am grateful to Andre Blais for many helpful discussions. Officials at the U.S. Census Bureau and at Elections Canada also gave generously of their time to help me understand their data sets and sampling procedures. My graduate student colleague, Aram Hur, has worked with me on a related paper.

² Merriam’s colleague, the great pioneer Harold Gosnell (1937, appendix B; and 1942, 167, 175, 177), managed to do a few factor analyses and multiple regressions in this era. The work involved must have been staggering.

Other kinds of data sets exist, too. In the United States, one can now purchase the voter file for the entire country—approximately 150 million records, each giving the citizen’s name, address, age, date of registration, and birthdate, along with the electoral ward, county, and federal, state, and local election districts in which the citizen resides. For every election at any level for which the voter has been eligible since registration, often extending back up to ten years or more, the voter file records whether the citizen appeared at the polls. Indeed, one former colleague of the author, no fan of voter turnout studies, attributes their proliferation to the easy availability of big data sets for statistical analysis rather than to the intrinsic importance of the topic or the level of theoretical advance they have provided. Without adopting that view in its entirety, one may indeed agree that few areas of political science have as many datasets as does the subject of voter turnout.

Yet I would argue that, for all the profusion of data, we still lack what we need to test our theories of voter turnout. The remainder of this paper lists the standard variables that appear in our theories, compares the theoretical implications with what we can observe, and finds that in general, we do not have what we need to make serious scientific advances. The emphasis is on the United States and Canada, but the problem is familiar in the rest of the democratic world, too.

The Main Factors in Voter Turnout

As I entered Canada on a recent trip to Montreal, the customs official asked what took me to his country. “A conference on voter turnout,” I said, “In 2008, Canadian turnout was actually lower than in the U.S.” He replied, “If you’d seen our candidates, you’d know why.” And with a resigned sigh, he stamped my passport and let me pass.

The customs official was giving the same explanation for why people vote that political scientists do: People vote if they want to *express* their preferences. Strong preferences generate heavy turnout; weak preferences lead to more abstention. This simple relationship was well known to practitioners and journalists in the nineteenth century; it appears in Merriam and Gosnell (1924, 159) with no claim to originality. Down to the present day, journalists and historians take for granted the force of “expressive voting” in generating turnout. Indeed, few propositions in political science are better verified.³

Civic duty is a second powerful impetus to turnout. It, too, has long been known (for example, A. Campbell *et al.* 1954, 86 and Appendix). In the *American Voter*, the same authors showed that turnout was fully 70 percentage points higher among those with a strong sense of civic duty compared to those with none. However, they wrote just a few paragraphs about this enormous effect (A. Campbell *et al.* 1960, 105-106). Methodological difficulties, along with the temper of the times, led to the duty items being gradually reduced in the American National Election Study

³ Here is a simple test for methodological rigor mortis: Which do you believe more strongly, the “purely observational” evidence that strength of preference raises turnout, or the stated findings from the latest political science “gold standard” randomized experiment?

(ANES), until they were abandoned entirely after 1992. It remained for Blais (2000) to reinvent the subject. Other scholars have quickly followed (for example, Fowler 2006; D. Campbell 2006).

Strength of preference combined with civic duty go far toward explaining turnout. For example, here is the crosstab from the YouGov/Polimetrix 2008 presidential election survey:

Table 1: Percent Turnout by Duty and Preference in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election (weighted)

	Duty none	Duty weak, some	Duty strong
Pref little, weak	16	16	81
Pref somewhat	49	91	90
Pref a lot	73	84	92

unweighted N = 897

As the table shows, these two questions divide the sample in ways that generate a 76 percentage point difference in turnout rates (from 16% to 92%). In a probit analysis, controls for political interest, partisanship, age, age-squared, and education resulted in only a modest reduction in the impact of duty (Blais and Achen, 2010). Duty and preference strength are the most powerful variables. That should surprise no one familiar with the last century of political science scholarship.

One can ask, of course, where preference strength and a sense of duty come from. Over several decades, Sidney Verba and his collaborators have stressed that citizens need “resources” to get to the polls (most recently, Verba *et al.* 1995). For turnout, these resources turn out to be primarily cognitive resources, especially education. Organizational experience in secondary institutions such as churches can also matter. In addition to other effects, these mechanisms induce the appropriate civic norms (duty) and they give the citizen the skills to understand politics and develop a rooting interest in taking sides (preference). In this sense, the resources model is a kind of reduced form explanation for turnout. That is, resources are a first stage of the causal chain, and they feed into more proximate causal factors such as duty and preference.

Finally, other things matter for turnout as well. Education does, no matter what else is controlled, perhaps because it proxies for intelligence, or for reliability about showing up for appointments, or for reducing the costs of the act of voting: No one knows for sure. Age matters, too, probably because it measures political experience and development of partisanship. Information about the candidates and issues is correlated with turnout, likely because it makes the development of preference easier. Prior to that, an interest in politics leads to knowing more about politics. Personal contact from a party or candidate makes a few points difference. And

finally, the cost of getting to the polls also has an effect: distant polling places or severe weather all reduce turnout a bit. The list could be expanded and the causal chain could be extended backward even further to school socialization and parental influences, but this group of explanatory factors will suffice for present purposes.

To summarize, the standard variables in use in turnout studies of individual voters fall into three broad categories:

1. **The turnout decision itself.** In most conventional surveys, turnout is measured by asking the citizen in a post-election interview whether she voted (“reported vote”). In many Internet surveys, finding people post-election is deemed too difficult, and the citizen’s pre-election “intention to vote” is used instead. And finally, a handful of studies have used the official government record of whether the citizen appeared at the polls to measure turnout (“validated vote”). For some purposes, we are also interested in past votes, which can be measured by asking the respondent to recall whether she voted (“recalled vote”) or by consulting official records.

In practice, the differences among these measures of turnout for scholarly purposes have usually been relatively minor. But there is no question that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” and that good scholars “trust, but verify.” Validated vote is the gold standard. And in countries with voluntary registration, such as the U.S., validated registration status is also a desirable variable to measure.

2. **Demographic variables.** Here we include the classics, age and education, along with a variety of other factors such as residential location, income, gender, race and ethnicity, religious preference and church attendance, union membership, and so on. These measures usually come from self-reports, which are relatively unproblematic.

3. **Attitudinal variables.** In addition to the sense of civic duty and strength of preference for candidates, included here are all the usual components of election studies—issue positions, candidate evaluations, partisanship and partisan strength, media consumption, information levels, and a host of other variables. These variables must be assessed prior to the election to avoid contamination with the results.

Now suppose we ask the obvious question: In which countries do we have available for scholarly study a national face-to-face or telephone sample at each election that includes validated vote, demographic variables, and attitudinal variables? I believe that the answer to this question is a singleton—Sweden.⁴ There the same government agency that maintains the electoral register, Statistics Sweden, also conducts the Swedish National Election Study (2010), and has done so since 1956, generally with samples of several thousand. The result is an extremely high quality, longstanding election survey that has been too little exploited.

The Swedish National Election Study suffers from just two problems for present purposes. First, the turnout rate in Sweden is very high, and is even higher in the Election Study sample due to

⁴ Other countries, such as Britain in 2010, have validated votes recorded by their national election studies for certain years, as does the U.S. The American case is discussed below.

the usual self-selection forces. Thus there is too little variation to explain. And second, the study includes no measure of civic duty. The combination means that nowhere in the world do we have all we need to study turnout each time an election occurs. In nearly all election years, every country leaves us short in one respect or another. To illustrate the limitations, we begin with the United States.

American Survey Data Sources for the Study of Turnout

1. **The vote.** The vast majority of American surveys use reported vote as their measure of turnout. In the 1970s and 1980s, the ANES attempted, with increasing sophistication, to validate turnout in presidential years and most midterm years.⁵ However, electoral lists are a state responsibility, and the recordkeeping of many states made the project both time-consuming and inexact (Traugott 1989). A recent attempt at automated validation using the states' electronic voter lists also failed (Berent *et al.* 2011). Human coding of turnout using the electronic lists has not been tried. In sum, there have been no thorough attempts to validate American turnout for any full presidential election survey in nearly a quarter century.

The voter files themselves are electronic in every state due to the 2002 federal Help America Vote Act, passed in response to the 2000 presidential election debacle. These files include all validated votes and all registered voters (up to the limits of administrative recording error). Some states charge exorbitant prices, others restrict access in various ways, and some produce a lower quality product than one would like. But to a good approximation, the full national file is available. The difficulty is that the only other variables present are the citizen's residential location, date of birth, and date of registration. (In several Southern states with a history of voting discrimination against African-Americans, race is also included.) Thus the voter files are often useful as a sampling frame for turnout surveys and for voter contact experiments (since those not registered cannot vote), but they are virtually never used on their own.

Finally, exit polls are samples drawn from people leaving a randomly drawn sample of polling places on election day. The sample consists of validated votes, of course, and the questionnaires, though short, include a battery of demographic and attitudinal variables. However, the refusal problem is substantial and non-random; exit polls usually favor the Democrats and over-sample the educated. For example, on Election Day in 2004, many websites reported that John Kerry had a substantial lead in the exit polls. Moreover, a growing number of American states allow easy advance or absentee voting, which may be used by one third or more of the voters. Oregon and Washington State have adopted a universal mail ballot: In those states, no one goes to the polls on election day. All these issues, plus the absence of non-voters in the sample, have made exit polls of little use in turnout studies.

2. **Demographics.** Virtually every turnout survey includes demographics. The largest such survey, the Voting and Registration Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS), is an add-on to the monthly unemployment survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the U.S. Census Bureau. It has been carried out in November of even-numbered years since 1964.

⁵ More precisely, the years with vote validation were 1964, 1972, 1974, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1984, 1986, 1988, and 1990.

The survey combines a very large sample of eligible citizens (currently approximately 80,000) with an extensive set of demographic and economic variables plus sophisticated survey weights. Moreover, the sample is stratified by state, so that small-population states like North Dakota and Alaska each have a respectable number of respondents. For all these reasons, the CPS is an enormously attractive, highly professional survey. It has been widely used in turnout studies, beginning with Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980).

The CPS has just two difficulties for turnout study. The first is that its turnout measure is self-reported, not validated. The resulting systematic over-reporting distorts the scientific accuracy of the survey, as it does nearly every other turnout survey (Hur and Achen 2012). And second, like the decennial census, the CPS's goals are purely descriptive. There are no attitudinal variables included (apart from a question about why non-voters failed to get to the polls). The relentless, thorough, arguably quite intrusive economic questions on the survey have no parallel on the political side. In consequence, the CPS has added a great deal to our knowledge of how turnout varies by state, education, and age, but very little to our theoretical understanding of why people vote sometimes and not at other times. It would be enormously helpful to add just a few attitudinal questions, but that has not been done. And there would be legal issues with identifying the CPS respondents to a researcher so that they could be linked to another survey.

3. Attitudinal variables. Here we encounter the typical academic survey used for turnout studies, such as the ANES. Of small to medium size (perhaps as many as several thousand respondents, but more commonly fewer than 1500), these surveys combine reported vote with a full battery of demographic and attitudinal variables. Formerly face-to-face, many long-running academic surveys now use telephones to reach people, or at least supplement their samples with phone surveys. And as cellphones replace landlines, and cellphones remain legally off limit to commercial and academic research, turnout studies have turned increasingly to Internet samples.

Surveys in this category form the backbone of theoretically oriented turnout studies. Most of what we know we have learned from them. Their difficulties are three: first, turnout is very rarely validated, so that the usual distortions, though relatively minor, persist. Second and perhaps more importantly, the sample sizes are small. It is hard to prove that a theoretically implied nonlinearity exists, for example. And third, these studies are expensive. To get decent response rates and to send interviewers to individual homes are each very expensive and growing more so. Even telephone surveys, done right, are costly. The temptation to substitute cheaper alternatives with unknown sampling properties and very high non-response rates can be overwhelming. Perhaps none of that matters, or perhaps some of the recent clever methodological proposals will produce reweighted Internet samples as good as the ANES. At this point, no one can be sure. However, the rising cost of conventional surveys, combined with miserable social science research budgets at the federal level, ensure that in the study of voter turnout, Americans will be walking on scientific thin ice for some years to come.

Canadian Survey Data Sources for the Study of Turnout

The Canadian situation parallels that of the United States in many respects, but with some important differences. One difference is that Canadian turnout has fallen rapidly in recent elections, and it seems clear that, measured comparably, Canadian turnout in 2008 was lower

than American turnout. Voting among Canadian youth has fallen particularly dramatically (Blais and Loewen 2011). Federal officials have expressed concern, but research on the topic has been difficult due to data limitations, as I now set out.

1. **The vote.** Official Canadian voter files are treated as confidential, almost as state secrets. In contrast to Britain and the United States, they are not available even to political parties, and certainly not to academic researchers, not even in redacted form with no identifying information. Moreover, the record of who voted is not recorded on the voter file itself, and turnout information is destroyed within one year after each election, as specified in the Canada Elections Act. In consequence, *there has never been an independent validated vote study in Canada.*

Elections Canada, the agency responsible for conducting federal elections and for maintaining the federal electoral rolls, has done small studies internally after the last three elections, using its own voting records, with occasional academic consultants (for example, Elections Canada 2008). These studies are helpful and should be continued, as Canadian scholars have stressed (Blais and Loewen 2011, 17). But like U.S. voter files, the Canadian records include very few demographic variables (not even education, for example) and no attitudinal data. Moreover, the data file constructed by Elections Canada is highly clustered, generating larger standard errors than usual with the same sample size. Even so, it would be very helpful for researchers to have access to the data. But those internal data files have not been released.

Of necessity, therefore, Canadian scholarly studies of turnout have relied on self-reports from surveys. But the combination of self-selection into the sample plus over-report has made reported turnout rates in the Canadian election study more than 20 points higher than the actual rate. It becomes difficult to have faith in the reports: In consequence, Gidengil *et al.* (2012) dropped a planned chapter on turnout from their forthcoming book on recent Canadian elections (Andre Blais, personal communication).

Canadian provinces maintain their own voter rolls for provincial elections. In Quebec, the voter file is updated with the voter's actual turnout at each election, and the complete longitudinal record is kept in Quebec City. While the files remain confidential, one researcher (Francois Gelineau of Laval University) has been given access. Thus at least in one province, a survey with vote validation might be possible, though none has yet been carried out. Letting researchers draw a sample from the official voter files, so that longitudinal validated votes could be linked to survey data, would be a particularly important step. Turnout experiments, too, would have a sample to draw from. Of course, the usual confidentiality rules would have to be observed, but that ethical norm has been virtually universally honored in academic survey research. A validated vote study would present no new obstacles.

For validated vote studies linked to surveys or experiments, researchers need confidential access to individual identifiable voting records. Without violating confidentiality laws, access could perhaps be provided in a "clean room" like those used in the U.S. for access to Census records. Alternately, the relevant government agency might do the validation or draw the sample. The full voter file would not need to be released in such cases.

At the same time, there is no reason not to release publicly a suitably redacted version of the full voter file. There would be no threat to privacy: What researchers need and what identifies individuals are quite different. "Age 40-45 and lives in north Winnipeg" certainly does not identify anyone uniquely nor threaten anyone's privacy. And recording and keeping the longitudinal turnout record is perfectly manageable: California does it with a population larger than Canada's. Even the poorest American states get it done, though not always perfectly. In light of the Canadian reputation for skilled and uncorrupted government service, a redacted Canadian federal voter file might set a standard for North America.

Thus the Quebec precedent is an important one for Canadian turnout studies. Having redacted voter files available to researchers would add considerably to our knowledge of Canadian turnout, why it has been falling, and why Canadian youth have been particularly slow to learn to vote in recent years. Absent some administrative changes, however, progress will be difficult, if not impossible.

To my knowledge, Canadian exit polls are not in the public domain. As in the U.S., the growing importance of advance voting and other forms of voting away from the polling place make them increasingly less representative and thus less useful.

2. **Demographics.**

The Canadian equivalent of the CPS was carried out for the first time in connection with the 2010 federal election. The work was done by Statistics Canada as part of their economic survey, just as in the U.S. Elections Canada paid for the add-on.

A few tables have been released from this study (for example, turnout by age and education, with some breakdowns by province), but no data are in the public domain. This is an unfortunate situation, one that damages not just academic researchers, but the Canadian economy as well. In the U.S., the CPS is used by private survey firms to benchmark and weight their own surveys. The result is a better quality product that enables those firms to prosper domestically and to develop tools to compete internationally, which they do very successfully. It is an excellent example of government-private enterprise cooperation, with publicly financed research feeding directly back into jobs and profits. Unfortunately, at present Canadian survey firms are being held back.

3. **Attitudinal variables.** Here Canadian circumstances and concerns are no different from the American case. However, the Canadian Election Study (CES) has a larger sample than its American equivalent--about 4000 respondents initially, falling to 3000 or fewer in the post-election follow-up. It is a telephone survey with a response rate of about 50%. (Andre Blais, personal communication.)

For some reason, the 20 percentage point over-report of turnout in the CES is worse than in the ANES, where it averages 10-15 points. A very close look at survey procedures in the two countries would be needed to learn why. In any case, the implication is that vote validation would be particularly desirable in Canada. However, as noted earlier, validation is currently impossible in federal elections and in most provincial elections.

This overview of American and Canadian data availability for turnout studies is summarized in Table 2. What the table makes clear is that in neither country do we have the data we really need to understand why people vote, and why so many do not.

Table 2. U.S. and Canadian Data Resources for Studying Voter Turnout.

	Publicly available?	Demographics?	Attitudes?	Validated votes?
United States				
State voter files	yes	limited	no	yes
Current Population Survey (CPS)	yes	yes	no	no
Academic surveys	yes	yes	yes	usually no
Canada				
Federal & most province voter files	no	limited	no	no
Elections Canada in-house studies	no	limited	no	yes
Quebec provincial voter files	limited	limited	no	yes
Statistics Canada 2008 survey	no	yes	no	no
Academic surveys	yes	yes	yes	no

Conclusion

Voter turnout is an important topic. Unlike much of what political scientists do, this topic interests ordinary engaged citizens. And they are right to worry about non-voting. Low turnout reduces government legitimacy. It may also bias government policy by underrepresenting particular groups of citizens. Last but not least, large pools of inexperienced and disengaged citizens are available for recruitment by charismatic politicians, some of whom are naïve, some a little weird, and some downright dangerous.

Scholars have available a plethora of data related to turnout, perhaps more than on any other political science topic. But the topic is complex, and we still lack what we really need. Outside Sweden, democratic governments have been slow to fund serious research on their own democratic foundations and on the wellsprings of substantial turnout. The decentralization and fiscal inadequacies of American recordkeeping also bedevil American work. Restrictive interpretations of Canadian privacy laws have hobbled their researchers, as have American legal strictures against linking datasets.

What is the scientific bottleneck? What do we really need to make serious intellectual progress on voter turnout? The answer is relatively simple, and it is the same in both the U.S. and Canada. The big national unemployment surveys need a voter supplement at election time, as both countries now do. What is needed additionally are two things. First, reported votes should be validated. And second, just a few attitudinal questions need to be added. My nominees would be duty, interest in the outcome, partisanship strength (*not* direction, for privacy reasons), and

perhaps media usage to measure political engagement. A few questions like these were successfully asked in the Irish Quarterly National Household Survey in 2002, and a shorter battery again in 2011 after the Ireland national election of that year.

If having a highly professionalized government agency ask mildly political questions is too sensitive in the U.S. and Canada, then that part of the survey could be contracted out to a reputable university or private-sector survey research team using the same sample, with the government having no access. Finally, some panel design for the surveys would allow us to factor out the individual idiosyncrasies that damage inferences from purely cross-sectional studies.

In both countries, doing all this will require some additional funding, as well as new inter-agency coordination and cooperation. And there will be concerns from the users of the economic data that political questions will contaminate the survey. But of course, the reverse concern is plausible as well. My own view is that neither concern will prove real, but in any case, it would be easy to do split-sample tests to find out. The point is rather that mildly personal questions are sometimes justifiable even when they are not about money, and that a country's democratic health should be given the same priority as its economic health.

Alas, just writing down what we need makes the challenges obvious. Doing it right would not be much more expensive than what our governments are doing now. But it is easy to see that resistance will be substantial—with arguments that one can understand and respect, but arguments that are not persuasive in the end, arguments that need to be overcome. It will take time. Until then, we limp where we might run.

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