

**The impact of marketing activity on voter turnout – a study of the UK and German
Euro Elections.**

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Abstract

Over the past decade there has been a growing interest in political marketing, in Europe, the USA, and elsewhere. In the political science field, similar work has been undertaken – although not, of course, using the vocabulary of marketing. However, while there seems to have been research into why voters vote in the way they do i.e. for which party, there appears to have been no research into how marketing activity can influence voter turnout. Theories of voter participation in political science fall broadly into two camps: sociological influences or rational choice. In other words, voter turnout is dependent on “something about citizens” or “something about elections”, with the main focus on the character of elections. However, there is also some recognition that voters’ interaction with parties and candidates is also important. This study evaluates EU election data for the UK and Germany and examines the impact of marketing activity (party campaigning) on voter turnout.

Introduction

This study focuses on how party campaigning plays a role in influencing voter participation using a logistic regression analysis of individual survey data from the European Election Studies (EES) archive. Franklin has argued that “turnout is a vitally important area of research that is very poorly understood (Franklin 2004: xii) [and that] further research is essential”.

The paper proceeds as follows. The political marketing literature is briefly reviewed while existing literature on voter participation, highlighting the theoretical and methodological issues encountered by previous studies, and explicating the theory of rational choice institutionalism which underpins this paper is outlined. Then, several explicit hypotheses are developed from the theory, and the methodology used to test these hypotheses is discussed. The fourth section presents and analyses the findings, and the fifth concludes with some implications and suggestions for further research.

The literature reviewed

Over the past decade there has been a growing interest in political marketing, in Europe, the USA, and elsewhere. Research has included such developments as strategic analysis, social propaganda, corporate lobbying and the application of marketing management techniques to referenda. More recently, work on gender in electoral decision-making, branding of candidates and parties, and segmentation strategies in electoral campaigns has been undertaken.

In 1996, Wring argued that, using a standard evolutionary model of marketing, it was possible to identify three key stages in the development of political marketing. He labelled these phases the propaganda, media and marketing orientation approaches to the electorate and electioneering. Using this framework, Wring was able to identify the role that basic marketing concepts have played in UK elections since the beginning of the 20th century. He argues that, contrary to popular belief, professional advertising and image consciousness date back to that time (the first “propaganda” stage of

development). The second or “media” stage began with the acknowledgement that popular television and consumer marketing in the 1950s led to the need for coherent party image management. Finally, from the late 1970s the two main UK political parties developed a strategic marketing orientation approach.

In contrast, O’Shaughnessy (2001) argues that “marketing is a business discipline whose relevance lies primarily in business: we should not assume that political contexts are ... analogous to business to the extent that methods can be imported and used with equal effect”. Research elsewhere (O’Cass, 1996) has suggested that the customer centred orientation of the marketing concept and approach is less significant in politics. Cass’ research in Australia found that the executive decision-making category of political respondents, in particular, felt that the role and significance of the voter was negligible in developing the political “product”.

Nevertheless, research into voters from the political marketing perspective, has, of course, been undertaken. Hayes and McAllister (1996) have suggested that, rather than concentrating their efforts on floating voters – those who, in the UK make up a quarter of the electorate and who make up their minds only once an election campaign is well underway – political parties should target those voters who made up their minds in the one or two years prior to an election, using pre-campaign marketing techniques. Past research indicates that political campaigns lead to a better informed voting public, but that overall they tend to reinforce voters’ existing predispositions and comparatively few voters are influenced (McAllister, 1985; Miller, 1991). Hayes and McAllister (2001)

have also studied the floating or “switch” voter, concentrating their attention on female voters in the 1997 UK general election. Using the British Election Survey data, they concluded that women were significantly more likely to delay their voting decision than men and that the campaigns of parties which targeted these voters (the so-called “Worcester woman” – female voters, usually working women, in marginal seats) appear to have been effective in mobilising their vote.

Despite this apparent interest in the political campaign – the tactics of political marketing – and its influence on how voters vote, there seems to have been no research within the political marketing arena on whether political marketing is influential in determining whether the electorate votes at all.

On the other hand, the political science literature makes the explicit link between voting systems and voter behaviour. Theories of voter participation fall broadly into two camps: sociological factors or rational choice (Clarke et al, 2004; Norris, 2004), essentially boiling down to whether levels of turnout are due to “something about citizens” or “something about elections” (Franklin, 2004, 3-4). In any large electorate the probability of casting a pivotal vote and influencing the electoral outcome is always so small that it discounts any potential direct benefits to the voter, so according to this model no rational individual would ever turn out to vote (Clarke et al, 2004). Thus the “paradox that ate rational choice theory” (Fiorina, 1990: 334) resulted in a renewed focus on the character of *citizens* rather than elections in explaining why people vote. Academics following Riker and Ordeshook (1967) developed the ‘resource-model’ of voter participation,

which views voting as a habit learned (or not) during the formative years, which is determined above all by one's education, income and class.

Numerous subsequent studies have found evidence in support of demographic and/or psychological factors driving the individual decision to vote. For example, analyses of survey data have commonly found age and education to be the most important determinants of an individual's likelihood to vote (e.g. Blais et al, 2004; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980), since better educated and older citizens are what Wattenberg (2002: 80) terms "resource rich". Studies showing significant correlations between voter turnout and, respectively, class (Clarke et al, 2004), housing tenure (Pattie and Johnston, 1998), income and occupation (Evans, 2003) also lend support to the resource-model of voter participation. However, explaining voter turnout in terms of 'something about citizens' can not account for changes in turnout *over time*: given the socio-demographic trends in mature democracies (wealthier, better-educated citizens), we would anticipate an increase, rather than a decline in turnout (Blais et al, 2004; Evans, 2003; Wattenberg, 2002).

Rational choice institutionalism recognises that voters' incentives are driven both by electoral rules and by interaction with parties and candidates and stress the *strategic* consequences of electoral systems, such as *party campaigning* (or *marketing*) and direct mobilisation of voters. The link between campaigning and turnout has often been made: Gerber and Green (2000) and Green and Gerber (2004) find that door-to-door canvassing by party activists has a substantial influence on voter turnout in the US. In addition,

Pattie et al (1995) demonstrate that increased spending on constituency campaigning in the UK increases turnout for all parties. Significantly, as with the political marketing literature reviewed above, they also find that parties spend the most in marginal seats and the least where they have little hope of winning.

Studies of voter turnout encounter several methodological problems. First, several authors have noted the problematic discrepancy between conclusions based on aggregate- or individual-level studies (e.g. Aldrich, 1993; Curtice, 2003; Evans, 2003; Franklin, 2004; Pattie and Johnston, 2001). For example, Whiteley et al (2001) analyse constituency-level data and find marginality to be positively related to percentage turnout; specifically, turnout is on average 10% higher in marginal seats. However, because they study aggregate- rather than individual-level data, they are unable to tease out whether this phenomenon is due to the voter's perception that her vote counts more in marginal seats, or the fact that parties campaign harder in such seats, as they recognise. Nevertheless, aggregate-level studies, using national, constituency or cohort-level data remain popular (e.g. Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Bowler et al, 2001; Franklin, 2004, respectively), despite the added risk of ecological fallacy.

Even studies which avoid ecological fallacy by combining individual and aggregate-level data run into additional methodological problems. Cross-national studies, such as those by Norris (2004) and Siaroff and Meyer (2002), fail to control for country-specific factors that might affect turnout levels, such as the particular issue mix, national incidents, media coverage, or political corruption. As Franklin (2004: 15) points out, comparisons across countries may bring us to misleading conclusions.

Hypothesis and Methodology

H1: *An individual is more likely to turn out to vote if she has been directly mobilised by face-to-face party campaigning.*

The crucial theoretical assumption underlying this hypothesis is the explicit link between party behaviour and electoral systems. We suggest that what really drives down turnout is uneven campaigning by political parties, who only direct their (scarce) resources, in terms of both manpower and money, to the most marginal seats in contries such as the UK with first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral systems. By testing for this hypothesis, this paper adds an element to previous studies, which tend not to analyse what particular mechanisms might be driving the relationship between electoral systems and voter participation.

To test this hypothesis, a cross-sectional comparison of individual-level turnout in Great Britain (hereafter Britain) and (West) Germany for the 1994 European Parliament (EP) elections was carried out using survey data from the EES archive. Quantitative statistical analyses of individual-level survey data are common in the literature on voter participation (e.g. Clarke et al, 2004; Franklin, 1999, 2004; Norris, 2004; Pattie and Johnston, 1998, 2001). However, the research design used in this paper departs from the existing literature and circumvents some of the problems other academics have encountered in several ways.

The decision to analyse turnout at EP elections allows us to assume a similar context operating around the elections in both countries, in terms of issue mix, institutional context and salient recent events, unlike other cross-national studies of turnout. Since the hypothesis is not concerned with turnout over time, it was preferable to conduct a cross-sectional study, as this eliminates the possibility that variations in turnout were due to environmental or demographic changes exogenous to the institutional context, as may be the case with longitudinal analyses.

It might be said that EP elections, as “second-order contests”, are inappropriate for assessing voter participation, since turnout is notoriously low across all countries compared to national elections (Hix, 2005: 193). Indeed, Franklin (1999: 209) acknowledges that “European elections are prototypically low salience elections [since] [e]xecutive power is not at stake, and [they] have virtually no role in directing the course of public policy.” Franklin does use EES data, however, stressing that EP elections have a “surrogate importance” due to their implications for national politics. Still more important, for our purposes, is that though turnout *in general* may be lower for European elections compared to national contests in all member states, there is still a significant difference – on average 25% – between turnout at EP elections in the UK and Germany, as shown in table 3.1. This mirrors the gap in turnout levels between the two countries at their respective national elections – though it is exaggerated – and indicates it is not merely the fact that it is a less salient election that dissuades British voters from turning out.

Table 1: Percentage turnout at EP elections

	1979	1984	1989	1994	Mean
UK	32	33	36	36	34.25
Germany	66	57	62	60	61.25
EU average	63	61	59	57	60

Adapted from Cracknell and Morgan (1994: 15)

The rationale for selecting Britain and Germany in particular, out of the 15 countries which voted in 1994, is based on the ‘most similar’ method, which aims to remedy the problems inherent in non-experimental research by purposeful case selection (Peters, 1998). Table 3.2 sets out the similarities and dissimilarities between Great Britain and Germany on which the comparison of voter behaviour is based. The two countries are similar on grounds of size and voting weight in the EP, controlling for the variation in turnout being due to the sense a voter may have of her country’s prominence or influence in the EU, which may affect her incentive to vote. Further, they are similarly wealthy countries – both net-contributors to the EU budget (Hix, 2005:155) – which may increase citizens’ anti-European sentiment and thus their propensity to abstain from voting in protest. They are also identical on Freedom House measures of political rights and civil liberties, ruling out the possibility that the turnout gap is due to one country having a poorer functioning democracy. However, they are different in both the constant difference in turnout levels of c.25% and the electoral systems used.

Table 2: Comparing Great Britain and Germany

	Great Britain ¹	Germany (West) ²
Size (population x 000)	44,225	52,083
Number of MEPs	84	99
GDP per head 1994 (€, PPS ³)	16,960	18,520
Political Rights ⁴	1	1
Civil Liberties	2	2
Type of Electoral System	Single-member plurality in 84 constituencies	List-PR (Federal and Land lists)
Deviation from Proportionality (DV) ⁵	16.85	8.05
Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (EPP) ⁶	1.69	3.00
Relative Reduction in Parties (RRP) ⁷	27.12	14.48
Number of Interviewees (N)	1078	1082

Sources: Eurobarometer 41.1 (1994); Hix (2005: 272); Cracknell & Morgan (1994); International IDEA (2007d+e); Der Bundeswahlleiter, (2007b); Leeke (2003); UK Office of the European Parliament (2007); von Schwartzberg (2004).

¹ Since Northern Ireland used a preferential voting system for the 1994 elections, we only considered Britain. Number of MEPs, population etc. have been adjusted as appropriate.

² Germany had only reunified in 1990 so separate surveys were still carried out in the 1994 EES. We used the West Germany dataset. The East Germany dataset would not be a useful comparison to Britain, since we would expect different attitudes towards voting and the EU in general from citizens who had only recently become members.

³ Purchasing power standard: accounts for differences in national price levels (Hix, 2005: 272)

⁴ Political Rights and Civil Liberties: Freedom House indicators of levels of freedom within a country's political system where 1 = most free, 7 = least free (International IDEA, 2007)

⁵ DV scores are calculated by summing the difference between % vote share and % seat share for each party (counting minus scores as positive) and dividing by two. This gives the proportion of seats that would be held by a different party under a pure PR system (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2005: 861-2).

⁶ EPP is a measure of all the parties in electoral competition, weighted in relation to their size. $N = 1 / \sum s_i^2$ where s = decimal seat share for the i^{th} party (Brockington, 2004: 488).

⁷ "RRP shows how much of the voters' choice set is ignored by the voting system in allocating seats", calculated as follows: $[(\text{EPPvotes} - \text{EPPseats}) * 100] / \text{EPPvotes}$ (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2005: 861).

EES datasets have considerable advantages in terms of both sampling and methodology. In terms of the former, the EES uses multistage national probability samples and national stratified quota samples, with sample sizes of 1082 and 1078 for Germany and Britain respectively (Eurobarometer 41.4, 1994: 30). The total N for this paper is therefore 2160, well above the standard minimum sample size of 1500, which produces the acceptable rate of error of $\pm 3\%$. The sampling methodology further ensures the representativeness of the samples: stratified sampling ensures all subgroups within a population are represented in the sample based on proportionality to the total population, whilst probability sampling within the stratified quota samples protects against selection bias (Schmitt et al, 1996). We can therefore be confident that the sample statistics generated by the logistic regression analysis are generalisable to the population of interest with a known amount of sampling error.

In terms of methodology, the most obvious advantage of survey data is that the units of analysis and observation are individuals. This reduces the risk of ecological fallacy and means we can be more confident that the results of the regression analysis are tapping into *individual* reactions to the context of electoral systems, rather than assuming aggregate outcomes indicate individual-level behaviour. EES researchers are also rigorous regarding survey design to ensure all respondents undertake the survey under the same conditions and at the same temporal distance from the election in question. It is conducted in all EU member states during the same time-period, using face-to-face interviews and identical questionnaires, apart from minor but unavoidable differences due to party names and country-specific institutions (EES, 2007).

Measuring the influence of party campaigning on voter participation to test H_1 was not straightforward. The EES survey asks respondents in which ways parties' campaigns came to their attention in the run-up to the European election (Q. 39). For our purposes the crucial distinction is between face-to-face campaigning by candidates or party activists, and other more indirect forms of campaigning such as advertising or media coverage. However, the EES question does not distinguish between modes of campaigning in this way. EES variable 31 does ask whether or not party workers called at the respondent's home to ask for votes – which can undoubtedly be classified as direct face-to-face campaigning. However, variable 32 asks if the respondent had election leaflets put in their letterbox *or given to them on the street or in shopping centres etc.* This is problematic as it conflates impersonal campaigning – mailings and leafleting – and face-to-face campaigning – addressing people on the street or in the local community and conceivably discussing the election to some extent with the potential voter. As a result it presented a problem for the regression model: if v32 was not classified as face-to-face campaigning, the logistic regression coefficients would likely *underestimate* the relationship between active party campaigning and voter turnout; if, though, it were included as face-to-face campaigning we might expect the regression coefficient to be inflated and *overestimate* the extent to which active party campaigning mobilises voters to go to the polls.

By way of a solution two separate baseline models were analysed. The first (Model A) included the dummy variable “party campaigning” (1 = R experienced direct

campaigning; 0 = R no experience of direct campaigning), in which v32 was included as direct campaigning.⁸ The second (Model D) replaced this variable with another dummy, “door-to-door canvassing” (1 = R experienced door-to-door canvassing; 0 = R no experience of door-to-door canvassing), which only coded those respondents who recorded positively on v31 as 1. If both models show a statistically significant positive relationship between the variable measuring party campaigning activity and the respondent’s propensity to vote, we can reject the null of no relationship with a substantial degree of confidence. If, however, there is some discrepancy between the two models we should view the results with greater caution.

The baseline models also include three control variables, accounting for the specific context of the EU election. The first (EUATT) is based on the assumption that the more eurosceptic the individual, the less likely they are to turn out to vote in EP elections. This is particularly important for this study, given the (accurate) stereotype of the UK as one of the most eurosceptic member states. In a Eurobarometer poll conducted in 1991, 70% of German citizens thought their membership of the EU was a good thing, compared to just 57% of British respondents (Hix, 2005: 153).⁹ Conceivably, then, the large gap in turnout between Britain and Germany might be due – in part – to a more eurosceptic electorate, so it was vital to control for this potential influence on voter participation when trying to isolate the effect of the different electoral systems. EUATT was measured using an EES question that asks whether the respondent is, in general, for or against

⁸ Mailings / posted leaflets are classified as direct campaigning, as they are aimed at a specific individual or household, as compared to TV or radio advertising, which is not targeted in the same way.

⁹ We cite a poll from 1991 as it is the closest available result to the elections we are analysing.

efforts being made to unify Western Europe, with a four-point ordinal scale ranging from 'against-very much' to 'for-very much'.

Similarly, it was important to control for any major issues that were particularly contentious around the time of the 1994 EP election, as voters may have chosen to abstain in protest at EU policy, rather than as a reaction to the electoral system. There were several issues touched on in the 1994 EES, most notably attitudes to the single market and to the proposed common currency (Eurobarometer 41.1, 1994). Given that the single market had been running with some success through the late 1970s and 1980s, it is unlikely that this was as salient an electoral issue as the proposed common currency, which had just been explicitly enshrined in the Treaty on European Union in 1992 (cf. McNamara, 2005). Moreover, the proposed Euro met with equally staunch scepticism in both the UK (as one might expect) and Germany, as the biggest market in the proposed eurozone with the most to lose from sacrificing the strong Deutschmark (cf. Jones, 2002; Reinhardt, 1997). This makes the issue especially important to control for: if there is a significant negative relationship between anti-Euro sentiment and an individual's propensity to turn out, this would suggest issues, not electoral rules, drive turnout, since in both countries there was vehement opposition to the proposed common currency. If, however, we find no relationship between attitude towards the Euro and individual turnout, and a significant positive relationship between the electoral system and turnout is present after controlling for the potential influence of this salient issue on voter participation, we can be fairly confident in rejecting the null of **H1**. Thus the variable EURO was measured using the EES question which asks whether the respondent is in

favour of replacing their currency with the ECU, coded dichotomously (1 = in favour, 0 = not in favour).

The final independent variable included in the baseline models (INTPOL) controls for the effect that an individual's *general* interest in politics might have on her propensity to turn out to vote. Particularly given the low salience of EP elections, the fact that executive power is not at stake, and the feeling that any change brought about by the election occurs far away from the nation state, it is likely that those who choose to vote in EP elections are those with a considerable interest in politics *a priori*. To tease out the effect of the electoral system and party campaigning on voter participation we therefore needed to control for the possibility that those who turn out in EP elections are only those who have a strong interest in democracy already, irrespective of the effects of PR versus FPTP. This was therefore measured using a four-point ordinal scale which records to what extent the respondent would say they are interested in politics, ranging from 'not at all' to 'a great deal'.

In addition to the baseline models (A and D) we ran further logistic regression analyses to test if any relationships found still hold when (1) socio-demographic and (2) psychological control variables are also included. The following socio-demographic variables were added: age, gender, education and subjective social class; while three variables controlling for psychological influences on voter participation were added: 'habit' (whether or not the respondent voted in the last election), strength of partisan identification, and the respondent's ideological affiliation.

Findings, Analysis and Conclusion

As explained above, two different independent variables were used to estimate the effect of party campaigning on voter turnout. Due to the phrasing of the EES survey question, we tested separately for the effects of (1) direct campaigning (door-to-door canvassing, leafleting and mailings) and (2) door-to-door canvassing, in order to test **H₃** – an individual is more likely to turn out to vote if she has been directly mobilised by face-to-face campaigning. The first variable – “party campaigning” – had a substantial positive effect on self-reported turnout in all three models, remaining significant at the $p < 0.001$ level even after inserting socio-demographic and psychological variables into the model. Specifically, after controlling for age, gender, education, social class, habit, partisan identification and ideology, on top of the baseline model, the odds of an individual turning out to vote are still 1.837 times – or 83.7% – higher if she has experienced direct campaigning – in this case defined as canvassing by party activists as well as leaflets given to them in the community or posted through their door. This significant positive relationship between campaigning and turnout supports previous findings (Curtice 2005; Gerber and Green, 2000; Green and Gerber, 2004; Johnston et al, 2006; Pattie et al, 1995; Pattie and Johnston, 1998) and suggests we can be 99.9% confident that it is correct to reject the null hypothesis.

However, given the problematic nature of the EES survey question, this variable does not only estimate the effect of *face-to-face* campaigning on voter turnout, but also direct mailings in the form of leaflets. The results are more equivocal for the second campaigning variable, however, which tests only for the effects of door-to-door canvassing on voter turnout. Baseline model D does find a positive relationship between canvassing and turnout – the odds of an individual turning out are 1.589 – or 58.9% – higher if she has experienced party workers calling at her home to ask for votes, and this coefficient is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, so we can reject the null hypothesis at this stage with 95% confidence. However, this relationship loses significance as more variables are entered into the model: after controlling for sociodemographic influences on voter turnout significance drops to $p < 0.1$, before disappearing altogether after psychological variables are included.

We are left, then, with a rather equivocal conclusion regarding the effect of party campaigning on voter turnout. The observed strong positive relationship loses significance after we try to isolate the effects of *face-to-face* campaigning from direct campaigning in general. In light of this, we would suggest we can not with any confidence reject the null hypothesis. However, this does not necessarily mean that **H1** is untrue, merely that the data we have analysed does not provide enough robust evidence to allow us to reject the null on this occasion. Since EES v32 conflates direct mailings (posted leaflets) with a leafleting in the community, it is impossible to separate out which mode of campaigning (impersonal or face-to-face) is driving the observed strong positive relationship between the variable “party campaigning” and the independent variable. It is

therefore plausible that something *is* occurring with face-to-face mobilisation and voter turnout, but we can not be conclusive at this stage because of the structure of the survey questions.

This paper forms part of a larger study examining electoral systems and their effect on voter turnout which asks whether the commonly found link between PR systems and high turnout is down to the inherent features of the electoral system – such as proportionality – or to the strategic consequences of electoral rules – namely, party campaigning tactics. In this paper we have demonstrated a strong positive relationship between direct campaigning and voter turnout – as well as an ambiguous one between face-to-face campaigning and turnout.

This account of voter participation merits further research, given the limitations of this study. Specifically, more might be done on the links between party spending, constituency marginality and turnout levels, or on the concentration of media campaigns, canvassing and/or ‘get-out-the-vote’ initiatives across countries with different electoral systems.

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