First-time boost beats experience: the effect of past eligibility on turnout

Yosef Bhatti  
Department of Political Science  
University of Copenhagen  
yb@ifs.ku.dk

Kasper M. Hansen  
Department of Political Science  
University of Copenhagen  
kmh@ifs.ku.dk

Hanna Wass  
Department of Political and Economic Studies  
University of Helsinki  
hanna.wass@helsinki.fi

A growing body of studies of electoral participation shows that first-time elections matter. Recent findings from the U.S. context indicate a clear positive causal effect of past eligibility on turnout. This study investigates whether these results apply to other institutional contexts as well. Based on individual-level register data from four elections in Denmark and Finland, we find that past eligibility either decreases voting propensity or has zero effect. Consequently, our results strongly suggest that the effect of first-time voting is sensitive to the context and can also be positive. In addition, differences across the four elections can be noted. The negative effect of past eligibility is strongest in elections characterized by low saliency, implying that high-salient elections mobilize all types of voters and therefore narrow the gap between first- and second-time voters.

Introduction

A growing body of studies of electoral participation suggests that individual’s first elections matter. Analyses conducted in the U.S. context have investigated the causal effect of past eligibility on current turnout, either as a variable of interest per se or as an instrument of actual past voting. The results indicate that prior experience in elections increases participation, illustrated by substantially higher turnout among second-time voters than those facing their first elections (Dinas 2010, 2012; Meredith 2009). This seems plausible given that voting appears to be a gradually acquired habit (Plutzer 2002) and past eligibility may thus be associated with positive learning effects.

The question is whether this pattern is universal. Several European studies show that first-time voters in fact participate more actively compared to young voters who already were eligible in previous elections (Bhatti and Hansen, 2012; Bhatti et al., 2012; Konzelmann et al., 2012; Metje, 1991). Although it is unclear whether the pattern reflects a negative causal effect, there are several reasons to expect that past eligibility either has negative or zero impact on turnout in subsequent elections. Being entitled to vote for the first time can encompass a certain hype compared to voting the second time around which simply may not have the same entertainment value. Electoral participation could also be one of the young person’s first official acts as an adult and therefore first-time voting may be particularly motivating in a situation where elections take place soon after turning 18. The recent findings seem to bear out this interpretation, demonstrating that first-time hype was even stronger among 16-year-olds Austrian voters, entitled to vote in all elections, than among 18-20-year-old first-time voters (Zeglovits and Aicholzer, 2014). Thus, even though the existing U.S. studies find a positive causal effect of past eligibility, descriptive results imply that the effect might be different in European context.

There are also indications that the effect of past eligibility might be sensitive to election type. Franklin (2004, 130, 207–208) illustrates that the character of an individual’s first elections has a considerable influence on subsequent turnout behavior. Highly competitive elections may be perceived as exciting and stimulating, which is particularly important for young voters who are not yet established in their participation patterns. In the opposite case, a negative learning experience might take place. This idea has been supported by Franklin and Hobolt (2011) who noted that being eligible for the first time in the elections for European Parliament, repeatedly characterized by low saliency, has a negative socialization effect for future participation. Likewise, Dinas and Franklin (2013) have suggested that in elections that are of lesser interest to voters, previous experience could be needed for participation.

These observations imply that first-time voting and experience gained from past eligibility may have a combined impact which strength varies according to character of elections. Given its exceptionality, turnout might be higher among voters who are participating for the first time, regardless of the level of excitement related to these elections. In line with Franklin and Hobolt (2011), the difference between first- and second-time voters should be even more pronounced if
prior elections were characterized by low saliency which thus led to negative first-time experience among the latter group. In such occasion, more freshmen voters have engaged in non-voting, which could be reflected in lower participation levels in next elections as well. The importance of past experience may, however, be conditioned by the character of current elections (Dinas and Franklin, 2013).

In this study, we estimate the causal effect of past eligibility using individual-level register data from Denmark and Finland, two previously unexplored institutional contexts in this regard. Our datasets include detailed information about age and actual turnout in one Danish and three Finnish elections that vary according to saliency of current and prior elections. When examining past eligibility, the challenge is to separate its effect from other factors that influence turnout among young adults more generally. Applying the approach suggested by Meredith (2009), our analyses are based on a regression discontinuity design which utilizes exogenous variation from voting-age restrictions in estimation of the causal effect. The idea is to compare the group of individuals who turned 18 right before the required date to become eligible in most recent previous elections, namely second-time voters in subsequent elections, with those who came of age just after it, namely first-time voters in subsequent elections. Since these two groups can plausibly be assumed to vary only in relation to the treatment variable (past eligibility) under investigation, the treatment effect can be detected by comparing the turnout of these two groups.

Our analysis offers two main contributions for the study of turnout among young adults. First, and most importantly, we re-investigate the causal effect of past eligibility (and its flip-side, first-time voting) in a new context. This is particularly important since to our knowledge its impact has not been studied in other countries using the same stringent designs than those used in the U.S. studies. The institutional setting in Denmark and Finland clearly differs from that of the U.S., especially as regards to one particular aspect, i.e. registration requirements. In contrast to the U.S., registration is administrated by government officials in Denmark and Finland, like most countries in Europe, and no special efforts are required from the part of the individual voter. The voter automatically receives a polling card in the mail. We may thus expect that the past experience has relatively less importance in terms of learning experience and handling the practical requirements for voting. The overall participation level in both countries is also substantially higher than in the U.S., although more modestly in Finland than in Denmark (Bengtsson et al., 2013). Second, in line with few newer studies, we investigate the extent to which the effect of past eligibility varies across elections within the context of investigation.

The study is structured as follows. In the next section, we discuss in more details the expectations suggesting either a mobilizing effect of learning and positive habit from past eligibility or a first-time boost in turnout. After introducing the institutional context of the study and research design, our empirical results are presented. We conclude by summarizing our findings and briefly discussing their implications.
First-and second-time voting and their implications on subsequent turnout

The relationship between age and turnout has a shape of a roller-coaster (Bhatti et al., 2012). Participation is highest during middle age when church attendance, increased activity in the community and various organizations, stronger party attachment and growing income all contribute positively to turnout (Strate et al., 1989, 444). Among middle-aged voters, voting is also often a habit. As a concept, habitual voting suggests that an individual’s propensity to vote in given elections is influenced by his/her past behavior (Green and Shachar, 2000, 562). Gerber et al. (2003, 540) refer to such persistence in voting as one of the most robust empirical findings in political science.

At least three warranted attempts to understand the process of habit formation have been put forth (Gerber et al., 2003, 548; Green and Shachar, 2000, 569–571). The first approach emphasizes the role of political environment. Aldrich et al. (2011, 540) remark that habitual voting can be perceived as a learned association between specific contextual cues and certain behavioral response. For instance, coverage of elections in the media may activate participation. Their empirical analyses show that a stable context, operationalized by less residential mobility, is highly relevant for habit formation. The second potential account has to do with the fact that when campaigning, political parties may have a higher tendency to target habitual voters than non-voters and first-time-voters (Gerber et al., 2003, 548; Green and Shachar, 2000, 569–571). Finally, voting may have a re-enforcing effect on socio-psychological orientations which further facilitate turnout, such as a sense of civic duty and an interest in politics. Moreover, participation boosts positive ‘conative attitudes’, i.e. an individual’s self-confidence in practicalities associated with the voting process, and strengthens his/her self-image as a voter. Of these three, the first two can be tested by using appropriate controls in conventional survey data sets, whereas the latter is more difficult to operationalize to applicable survey questions (Green and Shachar, 2000, 571).

Given the habitual character of voting, turnout is often expected to be lower among young adults participating for the first time compared to second-time voters who have had an opportunity to develop a voting habit. Such expectation is supported by findings from the U.S. studies which have been based on strong causal designs. By utilizing aggregate-level voting records and natality files from California, Meredith (2009) noticed that eligibility in the 2000 presidential elections increased participation in the presidential elections of 2004 by 3.0 to 4.5 percent. The data from a youth-parent socialization study by Jennings and Niemi, Dinas (2010, 2012) showed even stronger effects. Those young adults who had just reached the official voting age by the time of the 1968 presidential elections, namely 21, had a 17 percent points higher propensity to vote in the 1970 congressional elections than their otherwise similar peers.

Besides habit formation, past eligibility may also have other mobilizing influences on future participation. As voting involves certain costs, such as acquiring information on practicalities, especially about the registration process in the U.S. context, and parties and candidates, past experience presumably lowers the threshold for subsequent participation. Reaching the official
voting age may also increase young voters’ receptiveness for information concerning elections, both from the media and various socialization agents such as parents and friends. This implies that past eligibility entails a certain type of learning process. Evidently, this interpretation merges with the aforementioned increase in an individual’s confidence in his/her ability to act appropriately in the polling station, suggested by Green and Shachar (ibid, 570–571).

There are, however, also be good reasons for expecting a negative effect of past eligibility. As in many first-time experiences, there seems to be something special about voting for the first time. This notion has sometimes been labeled as the first-time boost (Konzelmann et al., 2012) or the first-time hype (Bhatti et al., 2012). The idea is that the psychological reward, thrill or simply entertainment of voting (Toka, 2009) is significant the first time an individual is eligible to vote. Reaching the official voting age may increase young voters’ receptiveness for information concerning elections, both from the media and various socialization agents such as parents and friends. Consequently, whereas voters may be more knowledgeable about voting during their second elections because of gained experience, they could also be less enthusiastic about it because they are no longer exercising a newly gained right. For newly-enfranchised voters, voting may actually be one the first opportunities and duties that come with the age of 18, such as conscription, obtaining a driver’s license and being entitled to take loans. In this sense, first-time eligibility may increase expressive motivations to vote, whereas the hypnotized positive second-time eligibility effect is more linked to the instrumental dimension of turnout via reduction in information costs. In addition, first-time voting may be more pronouncedly a social act (Zuckermann, 2005) since the newly enfranchised young are expected to receive positive reinforcement from family and friends (Plutzer, 2002, 43). Finally, second-time voters may have developed a habit of non-voting in case their first elections were characterized by low saliency, which offers leverage for first-time voters.

Whereas the results from the U.S. suggested the opposite, findings from several European countries seem to be aligned with this expectation. In fact, it has been shown that turnout is considerably higher for first-time than for second-time voters (Bhatti and Hansen, 2012; Bhatti et al., 2012; Konzelmann et al., 2011; Metje, 1991). Since these studies do not utilize stringent designs to estimate the causal effect of prior voting, it is unclear whether the effect is causal or merely an artifact of a general decline in turnout among young voters in the countries under scrutiny. In fact, the age-turnout relationship could mask a positive causal effect of prior voting. Based on the observed peak in turnout among first-time voters and the aforementioned reasoning, we thus suggest that in the countries included in our study past eligibility has a negative causal effect on turnout compared to first-time voters.

Though our main purpose is to investigate the general effect of eligibility, it is relevant to consider whether the effect differ across elections. Not all first-time experiences are necessarily similar. Recent empirical evidence suggest that the effect of past experience may be conditioned by the type of elections. In low salient elections, parties invest fewer resources in campaigning, the coverage of elections in media is lower and parties’ issue positions are more difficult to piece
together. All these factors may contribute to less rewarding first-time taste of elections, demonstrated by non-voting. This experience, in turn, expectedly has negative implications for the acquisition of voting habit, potentially reflected in non-voting also in subsequent elections.

Utilizing a regression discontinuity design, Franklin and Hobolt (2011) showed that voters who had the first opportunity to vote in the elections for the European Parliament had six percentage points lower estimated turnout compared to their peers who had prior experience of voting from national elections. Using data from American national studies (ANES) from 1954 to 2008, Dinas and Franklin (2013) in turn demonstrated that individuals who were first eligible in low-salient mid-term elections had lower propensity to vote in subsequent mid-term elections than voters who had been eligible in previous presidential elections. In line with these findings, we hypothesize that the negative effect of past eligibility is stronger when voters’ first elections were characterized by low saliency.

In addition to the past elections, the character of the current elections can matter. The first-time excitement can be substantially lower in elections that are considered to have ‘less at stake’ and which thus receive less attention. While first-time voters may in such occasion be particularly vulnerable for cost-benefit calculations, namely whether it pays off to vote, voters who were eligible in past elections have additional resources that can facilitate participation (Dinas and Franklin, 2013). Due to past eligibility, second-time voters probably have more knowledge on parties and candidates and their platforms, even though less information was available in current elections. Dinas and Franklin (ibid.) noticed that voters who were first eligible in the U.S. midterm elections only tended to vote less in next midterm elections but not in presidential elections. This finding suggests that the negative effect of past eligibility is less pronounced in low-salient elections.

In sum, contrary to existing studies we expect to find a negative effect of past eligibility. We further expect that the strength of the effect is conditioned by the character of the current elections as well as the prior elections.

The context of the study

The countries under investigation, Denmark and Finland, are characterized by high and medium-high turnout, respectively. In Denmark, turnout in parliamentary elections is usually around 85 percent or higher, whereas in Finland the corresponding figure is around 70 percent. Local and especially elections for the European Parliament (EP) show, however, considerably lower figures.

Voter registration is not required in Denmark or Finland as voting cards are sent directly to all eligible voters to their current residential address. Thus the costs of voting are kept to a minimum which should facilitate the formation of a voting habit. This is a clear difference to the U.S. where requirements vary across the country but in general registration is needed, and a change of a residence often requires renewal of registration. This might be particularly harmful for certain
groups of voters (Highton, 2004, 508) such as the young, since they move more often due to education and job opportunities.

The selection of elections included in this study was based on two criteria. First prerequisite was naturally the access to appropriate data. So far individual-level register level data are available from two Danish municipal elections (2009, 2013) and five Finnish elections. From these options, we formed a data set that would fulfill another criterion for the analysis, namely the combination of high- and low-salient first- and second-elections (table 1).^1

**TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

Turnout varies substantially across these four elections, reflecting their differences in saliency. The data set cover the 2009 Danish municipal elections where the turnout was 66 percent and three Finnish elections, namely 2012 municipal elections (turnout 58%), the 1999 parliamentary elections (turnout 68%), and the 2012 presidential elections (turnout 73%). In Denmark, the previous occasion in which the second-time voters were entitled to vote for the first time was the 2009 joined EP elections and the referendum for allowing the first-born woman to inherit the throne of the constitutional monarchy of Denmark, with turnout of 60 percent. In Finland, the corresponding elections were the 2012 presidential elections (turnout 73%), the joint municipal/EP elections of 1996 (turnout 61%), and the 2011 parliamentary elections (turnout 71%), respectively.

**Research design**

In our empirical analyses, the causal effect of past eligibility is examined utilizing a regression discontinuity design (RDD). By comparing voters who had just become eligible at the time of the past elections with those who had just missed the opportunity, we can estimate the causal impact of past eligibility (Dinas, 2010, 2012; Meredith, 2009).

The idea behind the RD design is to exploit a fixed cut-off to an underlying continuous variable in which individuals on each side of the cut-off or discontinuity vary in their treatment status. The strength of the design is based on the assumption that close to the discontinuity it is ‘as if random’ which treatment individuals received (i.e. on which side of the discontinuity they were located) (e.g. Angrist and Lavy, 1999; Gerber and Hopkins, 2011; Hahn et al., 2001; Olsen, 2011; 2012; Thistlethwaite and Campbell, 1960) Thus, the causal effect of the treatment can be estimated by comparing individuals on each side of the discontinuity.

For each elections examined in our study, the discontinuity is situated on the point where an individual was eligible to vote in the prior election. For the Danish case, we are interested in the individual-level turnout in the elections held on November 17, 2009. The cut-off of interest is whether an individual was eligible in the 2009 EP elections held on June 7, 2009. Given that voters are required to turn 18 on the election day, by latest, the causal effect can be estimated by comparing those born just before or on June 7, 1991 with those born on June 8, 1991 or later. For
the 1999 parliamentary elections held on March 21, 1999, for instance, the corresponding cut-off point is eligibility in the EP and municipal elections held on October 20, 1996. As in the Danish municipal elections, voters need to turn 18 no later than the election day. Consequently, we compare those born on October 20, 1988 or earlier with those born on October 21, 1988 or later.

While used earlier to estimate the effect of eligibility (Dinas, 2010, 2012; Meredith, 2009), it should be noted that a potential downside of the present research design is that it is not entirely clear that individuals close to the discontinuity receive only one treatment. The problem is that those slightly older than the cut-off point have voted before whereas those that are slightly younger have not, but individuals also vary by the age at which they could potentially use their vote for the first time. For instance, those born on October 20, 1988 in Finland could vote in their first elections when they were 18. In comparison, those born on October 21 had to wait for their first elections until they were 20-and a half-year-olds. In case a voter’s age at the time of his/hers first elections matters, as Franklin (2004) has suggested, this could constitute a second treatment. Consequently, we should be slightly cautious when interpreting the results.

For the 2009 Danish municipal elections, we have access to actual individual-level turnout of individuals from 44 municipalities through official voter lists (n=2,336,772). After the elections, electoral registers were computerised manually by registering for each social security number whether a person voted. The data also contain the date of birth of each individual. Of the entire data set, 511,475 individuals were between the ages of 18 and 30, while 12,240 were born in a plus/minus 2 month range of the cut-off of interest, namely June 7, 1991.

The information for the three Finnish elections is based on individual-level register data compiled by Statistics Finland. The data cover the mainland Finnish electorate excluding Åland. The voting information is collected from electoral wards and further linked with population registration data using personal identification numbers. For all three samples used in this study, the data include individual’s age in months at the time of the elections in question and an indicator for whether the individual was eligible in prior elections. The dataset from the 1999 Finnish parliamentary elections consist in a ten percent sample of all 18–30-year-old voters (N=80,699) and includes 2,064 individuals that turned 18 within plus/minus two months range of the 1996 municipal/EP elections. The data set from the first round of the 2012 Finnish presidential elections cover 286,107 voters of all ages, among which 1,575 turned 18 within plus/minus two months of the 2011 parliamentary elections. Finally, data from the 2012 municipal elections include 585,378 Finnish citizens and foreign residents entitled to vote. Altogether 3,743 individuals were eligible within plus/minus two months of the first round the 2012 presidential elections.

Results

We begin by graphically illustrating the relationship between age and turnout in one week (Danish 2009 municipal elections) or one month (the remaining three elections) increments. The data from
Denmark is more detailed, since the exact birth date was available from Statistics Denmark whereas from Finland only age in months is available. The red vertical line signifies the discontinuity, i.e. whether an individual was eligible in the prior elections. The expectation would be a significant break around the line so that those to the left of the line (first-time eligible voters) have higher turnout than those to the right of the red line (second-time eligible voters).

FIGURE 1–4 ABOUT HERE

Figures 1 and 2 lend support for first-time boost, as they indicate a negative effect of past eligibility on current turnout, although there is some variation across elections. In general, turnout decreases with age among young Danes (also Bhatti et al., 2012) in the 2009 municipal elections, but the drop seems particularly pronounced around the cut-off (about 5 % points, from about 60% to approximately 55%). In the 2012 Finnish municipal elections, the pattern is even more visible. Turnout decreases about ten percentage points in the cut-off point which seem to cover almost the entire decrease in turnout among the young. In figures 3–4, no clear decline in the point of the cut-off can be noticed. On the other hand, a pattern showing increase increase which has been detected in the U.S. context, is clearly not taking place either. Altogether, the results are particularly interesting vis-à-vis the findings by Meredith (2009) and Dinas (2010, 2012) who discovered positive effects of past eligibility of the magnitude of 3–4.5 and 17 percentage points, respectively.

The effects do appear to be sensitive to the character of the prior elections, but to opposite way compared to our expectations. We do find a negative effect of past eligibility in the 2009 Danish municipal elections which succeeded low-salient elections. The largest gap between first- and second-time voters can, however, be noted in low salient 2012 Finnish municipal elections which followed high salient presidential elections. Also the findings concerning the character of the current elections are in reverse vis-à-vis our expectation. The strongest effects of past eligibility occurred in low salience elections and not the other way around. It thus seems like whether one has been eligible before matters more in low than in high-salient elections. This might be related to the fact that high-salient elections mobilize all types of voters and therefore suppresses the differences between first- and second-time voters.

In tables 2 and 3, the causal effects are estimated more formally. We begin by scrutinizing the 2009 Danish municipal elections (table 2). In all ten models, individual-level turnout is treated as the dependent variable. The independent variable of interest is a dummy indicator denoting whether the individual was eligible in the prior elections. In line with figures 1–4, a negative coefficient would support the first-time boost hypothesis. In models 1–4, we only look in the neighborhood of the cut-off varying the bandwidth from two weeks to 2 months. In models 5–10, a larger sample that includes 18–19-year-olds and an experiment with different parametric specifications is utilized. The idea in models 5–10 is to include more data but to allow for varying degree of flexibility in our control for age to ensure we catch the effect of past eligibility per se and not age in general. In the table, age has been centered around the cut-off to facilitate easier interpretation of the interaction models. Zero on age indicates that the individual was born exactly
18 years prior to the 2009 EP elections.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 points to a negative effect of past eligibility, thus supporting the first-time boost hypothesis. In all models, the coefficient for past eligibility has negative influence. Departing from the local regressions (model 1–4), all coefficients are significant with an estimated effect of -5.1 to -6.4 percentage points. Similar effects are found in the parametric models. In models 5–7, all estimated effects vary between -3.5 and -4.5 percentage points. When interactions are added to the specification in order to allow for different developments on each side of the cut-off, the corresponding effects are -3.9 and -4.4 percentage points (models 8–9). The main effect drops just below the 0.05 threshold in model 10 (estimated effect -3.1 percentage points), but a likelihood ratio test does not justify expanding the specification compared to model 9 (the same holds for model 7 compared to model 6).

It should be noted that one important caveat relates to the fact that the relationship between age and turnout is not smooth everywhere except at the discontinuity point. To examine the potential seriousness of this problem, we conducted placebo tests by re-estimating model 1 for faux cut-offs utilizing all birthdates of those who were 18 or 19 at the time of the 2009 municipal elections. We found significant discontinuities in 10.8 percent of the cases compared to our expectation of five percent given the level of statistical significance applied (1.8 % of the cases had z-values at 2.99, as found in model 1, or higher). Consequently, while it is clear that the effect of past eligibility is not positive like in the U.S., we should be slightly more cautious about concluding a negative effect in Denmark than would be suggested based on the z-value.

We repeat the models from table 2 for the three Finnish elections. In the interest of saving space, only the coefficients for eligibility are depicted in table 3. The specifications are identical to table 2. The difference is, however, that since we only had access to the age of individuals in months and an indicator for eligibility, we ran regression on local samples which were +/- 1 month, +/- 2 months, +/- 3 months and +/- 4 months around the cut-off. In the parametric regressions we take +/- 1 year around the cut-off to get a 2 year window as in table 2. As in the Danish case, age has centered around the cut-off (0 on age indicates that the individual has born exactly 18 years prior to the 1996 municipal/EP elections).

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The results from the 2012 Finnish municipal elections are very consistent across specifications. In all models we find a significant, negative effect of past eligibility thus supporting the first-time boost hypothesis. Marginal effects in the discontinuity point are between 9.6 and 11.6 percentage points in ten models. This corresponds nicely to graphical impression from figure 2 where turnout drops from about 40 percent to around 30 percent at the cut-off. Like for the 2009 Danish municipal elections, we ran placebo tests with faux cut-offs (this time for each month instead of
each day due to the less fine-grained age information) and found significant effects in about nine percent of the point discounting the true cut-off (in no cases was the t-value as extreme as at the true cut-off). Turning to the 1999 Finnish parliamentary election, the past eligibility dummy has a negative tendency in all models, but in it is never significant. The magnitude of the marginal effects is consistently about minus two percentage points (it varies only between -1.4 percentage points and -2.4 percentage points across the ten models), i.e. the statistical insignificance is not only due to a lower sample size compared to the Danish municipal elections of 2009, for instance, but also to a lower point estimate for the effects. The results are still interesting given that we do not find a positive effect as one would expect on the basis of the findings from the U.S. context. Finally, for the 2012 Finnish presidential elections the effects are also insignificant in all specifications. No clear trend in the results can be observed. In six specifications, the tendency is slightly negative, while it is slightly positive in the remaining four. This case is thus lends weakest support for the first-time boost expectation.

Conclusions

In this study, we have examined the causal effect of past eligibility on turnout using a regression discontinuity design. Previous studies from the U.S. context find relatively unambiguously a positive effect, possibly related to habit formation and learning (Dinas, 2010; 2012; Meredith, 2009). Using four large individual-level register-based data set from Denmark and Finland, we find a mostly negative impact of past eligibility on turnout. The findings thus point towards the first-time boost hypothesis. The results are not as clear-cut as in the U.S. case since there was a clear negative tendency in three of the four elections, but it was only statistically significant in two. Overall, they however strongly suggest that the effect of past eligibility varies across contexts and is mainly negative in the Scandinavian context.

Consequently, our study implies that understanding the effects of first-and second-time eligibility may be more complex than has been previously recognized. Habit and learning may work in one direction and first-time boost in the other. In Denmark and Finland, the latter causal mechanism seems to be the strongest resulting in a negative effect of past eligibility.

Given that the effect of past eligibility seems to context-specific, the obvious next challenge is to identify some of the factors that account for the contextually varying results. One possibility is the fact that voters in the U.S. have to register while European voters do not. Second-time voters in the U.S. have faced two registration occasions while first-time voters have only experienced one. In Denmark and Finland, where all voters automatically receive a polling card by mail, first- and second-time eligible voters do not differ from each other in this sense. In addition, Denmark and Finland have a higher turnout than the U.S. although this should not necessarily influence the effect of past eligibility on turnout.
While the results showed opposite results compared to our expectations concerning the variance across the elections, we did find some support for the idea that past eligibility has stronger effect in low-salience elections. This may simply be because high salience elections are able to mobilize a broad variety of individuals which in turn mitigates individual-level differences. Naturally, it should be emphasized that this conclusion is based on observations from only four elections.

Finally, it should be noted that the results of this and other studies using a similar approach needs to be treated with caution due to the possibility that voters around the cut-off receive multiple treatments. They become eligible at different ages, sometimes at different types of elections, and vary in relation to their previous experience with voting. The findings from Denmark and Finland suggest, however, that the effect of first-time voting is sensitive to the type of elections. Future studies should examine further contexts and election types in order to form a more complete account of this intriguing variation.

References


Dinas, E., 2010. The impressionable years, the formative role of family, vote and political events during early adulthood. Fiesole: European University Institute.


Tables and figures

Table 1 Typology of the elections included in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>character of the prior elections</th>
<th>character of the current elections</th>
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<td>low salience</td>
<td>the Danish municipal elections of 2009 (prior elections: the Danish EP elections of 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high salience</td>
<td>the Finnish presidential elections of 2012 (prior elections: the Finnish parliamentary elections of 2011)</td>
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<td>high salience</td>
<td>the Finnish municipal elections of 2012 (prior elections: the Finnish presidential elections of 2012)</td>
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Table 2 The effect of past eligibility on turnout in the Danish municipal elections of 2009.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Local regressions</th>
<th>Parametric specifications (18–19-year-olds)</th>
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<td>-0.22*** (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.22*** (0.05)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chi²</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05,**p<0.01,***p<0.001. The main coefficients are unstandardised logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Past eligibility is a dummy variable denoting whether the individual was eligible (=1) or not (=0) in the last election. Age is measured in 1000 days, centered around the cut-off (0 is given to those who turned 18 exactly at the cut-off).
Table 3 The effect of past eligibility on turnout in the Finnish municipal elections of 2012.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eligibility coef.</th>
<th>Local regressions</th>
<th>Parametric specifications (18–19-year-olds)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+/-1 month</td>
<td>+/-2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility coef. 2012 municipal elections</td>
<td>-0.51***</td>
<td>-0.45***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility coef. 1999 parliamentary elections</td>
<td>-0.079</td>
<td>-0.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.088)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility coef. 2012 presidential elections</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p< 0.001. The main coefficients are unstandardised logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Past eligibility is a dummy variable denoting whether the individual was eligible (=1) or not (=0) in the last election. Age is measured in months, centered around the cut-off (0 is given to those who turned 18 exactly at the cut-off).
Figures 1–4 The effect of past eligibility on turnout.

(1) the Danish municipal elections of 2009

(2) the Finnish municipal elections of 2012

(3) the Finnish parliamentary elections of 1999

(4) the Finnish presidential elections of 2012
Notes

1 It should be pointed out that the saliency of elections is here understood as the characteristic associated with the type of elections. Consequently, high salient and low salient elections can be considered as equivalent to first- and second-order elections of which the former comprise in most cases parliamentary and in some contexts presidential elections, and the latter local and EP elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Our classification is thus not sensitive to context-related nuances in saliency of a given election. Given the highest turnout among elections and intense media coverage, Finnish presidential elections are classified as high salient although the prerogatives of the president have been substantially decreased.

2 Of all voters, 25 percent used a barcode on the polling card and computerization was thus not necessary (Bhatti and Hansen, 2010b).

3 The reason for wider time span for Finland is related to the fact that whereas Danish data include information on age in days, in the Finnish data the most stringent measure is age in weeks. In addition, the sample size is larger for Denmark which provides an opportunity for closer inspection.

4 We included +/- 15 days around the cut-offs to have 15 days of data on each side of the faux cut-offs.