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Comparing local electoral turnout in Great Britain and France: More similarities than differences?

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Abstract. Electoral and census data from Great Britain and France are used in a comparative analysis of the levels and determinants of local election turnout in the two countries. First, nine simple propositions about variations in turnout are tested using as similar as possible variables for each country. These variables are then used as the bases for multi-variate regression analyses. The residual cases in each country are compared in order to explore the more qualitative factors which may explain why some localities have a level of participation so much above or below that expected statistically. The paper ends with an attempt to specify an explanatory model of local electoral turnout applicable to both countries.

Introduction

The study of levels and trends in electoral turnout is a familiar theme for elections specialists in most Western states. Rates of political participation are seen, not least, as crucial indicators of the democratic health of the nation. Cross-national, comparative treatments of turnout are rarer, but have been undertaken to emphasise the role that institutional and systemic variables play in determining citizen participation (Powell 1980; Morlan 1984; Blais & Carty 1990; Jackman & Miller 1995). Table 1 demonstrates the stark variations in turnout at the sub-national level, even among the member countries of the European Union. It is obvious from these figures that factors such as the ease of voter registration, the proportionality of the electoral system used, and the normative pressures to cast a vote vary from state to state and have an impact on levels of turnout.

What is less well understood, however, is the degree to which those factors which determine intra-national variations in electoral participation are similar across countries. It is the purpose of this paper to test a number of hypotheses about turnout with data drawn from municipal elections in England and France. Although the absolute levels of turnout at this type of election vary quite considerably between the two nations, there is *prima facie* evidence that similar variables can explain variations by locality.¹ An explicitly comparative method is adopted and the paper ends with an attempt to specify an explanatory model of local electoral turnout applicable to both countries.

Table 1. Average turnout in recent sub-national elections in EU countries

Country	Mean % turnout
Luxembourg	93
Sweden	90
Italy	85
Belgium	80
Denmark	80
Germany	72
France	68
Spain	64
Ireland	62
Greece	60
Portugal	60
Netherlands	54
Great Britain	43

Source: Rallings, Temple & Thrasher (1994); various official sources and Keatings Contemporary Archive. Data unavailable for Austria and Finland. Figures are for the tier of government immediately below the nation.

Data and method

The French data comprise a record of voting turnout in all 382 metropolitan (i.e. non-overseas) municipalities with a 1983 population of more than 20,000 inhabitants. Socio-economic data are taken from the 1982 French census aggregated to the level of the municipality. The English electoral and census data are from 1991 and include a record of all 296 district councils, 36 metropolitan districts and 32 London boroughs (1990 elections) with a minimum population of 25,000.

The same propositions are tested for each country with as similar a set of variables as possible.² The results of the data analysis are discussed separately and comparatively for each proposition and in a final multi-variate regression. The residual cases in each country are then compared in order to explore the more qualitative factors which may explain why some localities have a level of participation so much above or below that expected statistically.

Testing some propositions about turnout

The pattern and distribution of turnout in England and France seems quite similar, albeit that the mean level in France is some 17 percentage points higher. The histogram and frequency curve in Figure 1 reveals a mean turnout in France in 1983 of 64 percent with a median value of 64 percent and a standard deviation of 7 percent. Whereas about two-thirds of citizens went to the polls in a city such as Verdun located at about the median, the turnout in the city with the highest participation rate (Hazebrouk) – 85

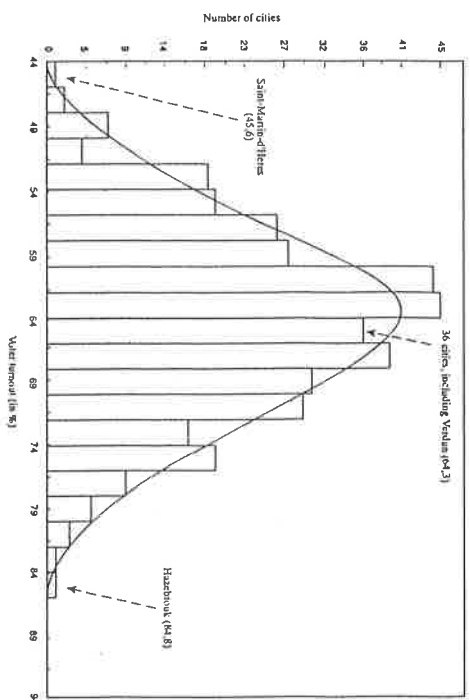


Figure 1. Distribution of municipal voter turnout rates (France, 1983).

percent) was almost twice that in the city at the bottom of the list (Saint-Martin-d'Hères – 46 percent).

In England, as Figure 2 shows, the mean turnout across all 364 local authorities was 47 percent, with a median value of 47 percent and a standard deviation of 5 percent. Fewer than half the electors voted in a local authority at the median such as Worcester, and more than twice the proportion of electors took part in the election in the authority with the highest turnout (Derbyshire Dales – 59 percent) as in that with the lowest (Kingston-upon-Hull – 28 percent).

The first two hypotheses in relation to such inter-authority variations in turnout focus on the spatial stability of the local population and the extent to which individual authorities are located within larger urban areas. It seems a reasonable *a priori* assumption that a strong and widely shared identification with a municipality is likely to be associated with relatively high levels of turnout. The degree to which a population is stable over time appears to be a good surrogate variable at the aggregate level for such feelings of identity. Hence:

Proposition 1: The greater the spatial stability of the population, the higher the turnout.

Variables to test this proposition are readily available for both England and France. In France there is a simple correlation of +0.35 between the level

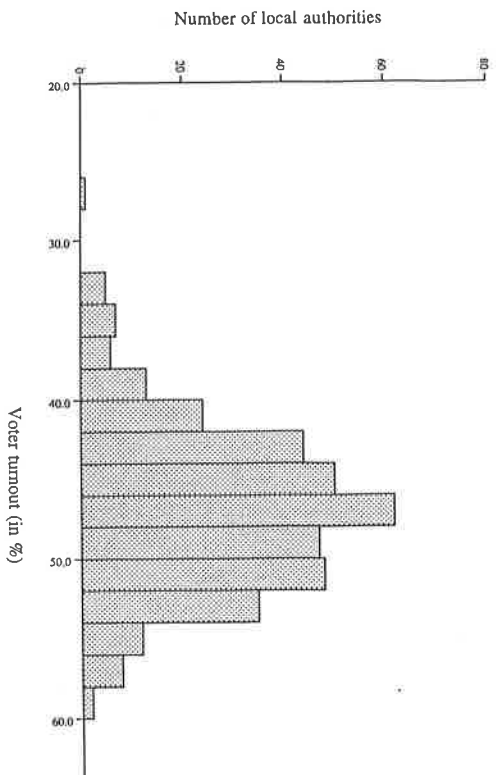


Figure 2. Distribution of municipal voter turnout rates (Great Britain, 1990/91).

of turnout among municipalities and the proportion of the population who were living in the same authority eight years before the census in 1975. Similarly in England, although the data only compares residence at the time of the census with just one year before, there is a correlation of +0.22 between turnout and residential stability (see Table 2). This proposition therefore receives modest support for both countries.

Several researchers have noticed that political participation is higher in isolated, traditional communities than in densely populated urban centres (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980; Verba & Nie 1972). Although social and economic, rather than spatial, factors may account for some of this relationship, it is likely that the inhabitants of such metropolitan areas may have less of an identification with the formal municipal/local government structure as opposed to thinking of themselves as residents of a larger, more nebulous 'city'. Hence:

Proposition 2: The less a local authority is part of a large urban area, the higher the level of local turnout.

In France this proposition is tested by examining both the proportion of the total urban area population contained within the municipality and the proportion of the municipal population whose place of work is in the local authority area. On both measures, the relationship is in the expected direction with the more autonomous and less mobile areas being associated

Table 2. Correlations between turnout and selected variables in Great Britain and France*

Proposition	Great Britain	Coeff.	France	Coeff.
1.	% resident in same authority in 1990	+0.21	% resident in same commune in 1975	+0.35
2.	population per hectare	-0.39	% municipal population in urban area	+0.25
			% residing and working in commune	+0.24
3.	% manual workers in the population	-0.28	% manual workers in the population	+0.15
4.	% self-employed	+0.51	% self-employed	+0.46
5.	% homeowners	+0.42	% homeowners	+0.39
6.	% self-described as other than 'white'	-0.31	% foreigners	-0.42
7.	strength of largest party in authority	-0.2	number of party list candidates	-0.23
			years local majority party in power	+0.21
8.	-	-	municipalities in Nord-Pas-de-Calais	+0.32
			municipalities in Provence-Alpes-Cotes d'Azur/Languedoc-Roussillon	+0.29
9.	number of electors per councillor	-0.44	-	-

* All Pearson's correlation coefficients are significant at the 0.01 level.

with higher levels of turnout (see Table 2). Cities whose electoral participation is amongst the highest often have clear and well-established spatial and demographic borders – being either isolated communes or core centres of urban areas whose population shows low residential or travel to work mobility. Cambrai and Abbeville, with turnout levels of 80 and 79 percent respectively, are good examples. On the other hand, municipalities which are merely dormitories for the population of a large urban area have much lower rates of local electoral participation as in Vaux-en-Velin and Heuvel-Saint-Clair with recorded turnouts below 50 percent.

For England it was necessary to examine this proposition by using data on population density. The number of inhabitants per hectare is an acceptable measure of the urban-ness of a local authority, although it does not tap the dimension of functional relations with nearby authorities. Nonetheless, again as expected, there seems a clear negative correlation of -0.39 between population density and electoral turnout. However, it should perhaps be pointed out that Kingston-upon-Hull, despite forming an isolated urban area with a stable population and little workplace migration, had a level of turnout in 1991 nearly 5 percentage points less than that of the next poorest perfor-

ning authority. Spatial matters may explain some of the variations in turnout; they demonstrably do not constitute the whole story.

Electoral sociologists have frequently noted that political participation varies according to social status attributes (Verba, Nie & Kim 1978). Such a finding is commonplace in the United States, but has not always been supported in the European context. Indeed it has been shown that in cities where the manual working-class make up a large proportion of the population, political mobilisation and participation can be high (Hastings 1991; Alford & Lee 1968). For example, traditional mining communities in both Great Britain and France have been reported as having greater than expected rates of turnout (Eagles & Erfe 1989; Giblin-Delvallet 1986). With the balance of the evidence unclear it seems particularly appropriate to examine comparatively the relationship between community class structure and turnout. Hence:

Proposition 3: The larger the proportion of the population in the manual working-class, the higher the level of local electoral turnout.

A simple correlation of these two dimensions presents our first discrepancy between patterns of behaviour in England and France. In France there is a positive and significant, if weak, relationship between turnout and the communal strength of the working-class. This confirms the American findings of Alford & Lee (1968) that the wealthiest cities are not always those with the best voting records. Of the 13 French communes with the highest proportion of miners in the population all except one have levels of turnout above the mean, with the mean exceeded by more than one standard deviation in eight instances. In contrast, the wealthiest French city according to our data, Neuilly, has a turnout of only 58 percent.

In England, the correlation between the proportion of manual workers in the local authority and turnout is negative. High turnouts seem to be the preserve, rather, of stable and *relatively* affluent rural or suburban communities. Interestingly, although the mean turnout in the ten most affluent local authorities in England is at 45 percent some six to seven percent higher than that for the ten poorest, both figures are below the overall average. This suggests that in England at least the relationship between wealth, status and turnout is not linear in either a positive or negative direction.

A related proposition, that it is in fact the strength of the working-class party that influences the rate of turnout, could not be tested for France.³ In England, however, there was a negative correlation between vote for Labour and local electoral turnout. Both this and the previous finding suggest that in socially homogeneous local authorities the clear dominance of one political party, and a consequently less competitive electoral environment, may itself depress turnout.

Regardless of other aspects of the spatial or social character of a municipality, it might be expected that high rates of participation would characterise

those members of the community with a clear financial interest in the way in which it was governed. Local business people, in particular, are seen to be affected by the policies pursued by local authorities and would thus want to take a full part in the process of the selection of that authority. Indeed the mayor of Grenoble seems to have been voted out of office in 1983 as the result of the mobilisation of shopkeepers in that city (Brechon 1983).

More generally, many of the most controversial local issues of recent years in both England and France have directly concerned this sector. There has been concern about the parallel expansion of the number of pedestrian precincts in town centres and of shopping malls on green field sites. Local fiscal policy, involving a four-fold increase at constant prices in taxation between 1960 and 1980 in France and the introduction of the poll tax and uniform business rate in England, has also helped to mobilise politically the self-employed.

A larger category of citizens with a direct interest in local taxation issues are homeowners. Such people have always been associated with support for right of centre parties, but they are also more likely to be involved in municipal political activities and to have an above average level of electoral participation. Studies have shown this to apply even having controlled for occupational status (Brechon & Cautres 1987; Denver & Hands 1985; Kingston, Thompson & Eichar 1984). Hence:

Proposition 4: The larger the proportion of the population who are self-employed, the higher the level of local turnout.

and

Proposition 5: The larger the proportion of the population who are property owners, the higher the level of local turnout.

These propositions are clearly supported in England and France for both types of citizen. In each case the simple correlations are among the strongest in the array of data that we have examined. In France local rightist leaders exploited concerns about taxation levels among these groups: at the 1983 municipal elections and seem to have been rewarded with both electoral success and a high rate of participation (Hoffmann-Martinet 1988). In England, the introduction of the poll tax in the late 1980s – designed to spread the burden of local taxation among all citizens rather than for it to fall disproportionately on property owners – caused a strong electoral reaction. Although the philosophy driving the policy could crudely be summarised as one of ‘no representation without taxation’, in the event most small businesses and property owners discovered that their total local tax burden rose quite sharply and they became among the tax’s most vociferous and motivated opponents.

It has been noted in both Great Britain and France that immigrants and

their children have a fairly low level of integration into the established political system (Schnapper 1991; Anwar 1994). Given this, we would expect the members of these groups to participate less in local elections. Hence:

Proposition 6: The larger the proportion of the population from ethnic minority communities, the lower the level of local turnout.

This proposition was measured in France by the proportion of the population of each municipality born abroad and with non-French parents. It produces a negative and significant correlation with levels of turnout. In England, the proposition is tested by identifying those in the community who do not describe themselves as 'white'. The simple correlation suggests that the greater numbers of 'non whites' are associated with lower levels of turnout.

So far our profile of the way different variables are associated with levels of turnout in England and France has concentrated on socio-economic and demographic factors. Although there are clear similarities between the two countries, these variables in themselves cannot fully explain either inter- or intra-country patterns of turnout. We now turn therefore to a consideration of the impact of the political context on participation. Here we may expect more variation in the results given the different political traditions of the two countries. The initial approach remains one of the comparison of simple two-way correlations.

It may be assumed that electors in local authorities pay at least some attention to the activities of political parties. Levels of turnout will be influenced by the nature and visibility of the political debate, both nationally and locally. Indeed in both England and France gross differences in turnout levels at municipal elections can often readily be interpreted by reference to the national political scene. In France, for example, the reduction in municipal turnouts between 1983 and 1989 seems at least partly a function of a change in the intensity with which the left-right cleavage was fought out. In England, very high average levels of turnout throughout the country at the height of the controversy over the poll tax in 1990 became very low average levels of turnout just two years later when the local elections took place barely a month after the 1992 general election.

Much more local political contexts can also have an impact on participation. The number of candidates and the degree of electoral competitiveness in individual contests and across local authorities would each seem likely to be related to turnout. Hence:

Proposition 7: The more intense the local electoral competition, the higher the level of local turnout.

The different political systems in England and France require this proposition to be tested in rather different ways. In France there is some evidence that competition between the lists of just two parties represents a more

competitive situation than the appearance of multiple parties.⁴ Certainly the simple correlation between the number of candidates and turnout is negative. Equally, however, all but 22 of the 382 municipalities under study in 1983 had four or fewer lists of candidates and the mean turnout levels for each of these categories vary only slightly. A second surrogate measure of electoral competition is the length of time a given party has been in power locally. The implication being that the dominance of one party will lead to a non-competitive electoral system and thus to lower levels of turnout. This relationship does appear to hold in the French situation.

In England electoral competition is measured in terms of the numerical majority of the largest party on the council over all other parties. One party having a large majority over all others may be seen as indicative of a less competitive local political system; no party having an overall majority of a closely fought set of elections. As expected there is a negative relationship between the strength of a party and the level of turnout, but it is not a strong one. However it might be argued that English voters will have a better perception of the closeness of the contest in their own particular ward rather than on the council as a whole, and it will be the likelihood of affecting the result at that level which will determine their participation. Unfortunately ward level data are beyond the scope of the present paper.

Although both Great Britain and France constitute examples of fairly centralised state structures, variations in local political participation may also be explained by aspects of local political culture. In the United States, for example, it has been shown that controlling for other relevant variables, turnout in municipal elections is higher over time in the old cities of the East and Midwest than elsewhere in the country (Alford & Lee 1968). In England we have noted before that local turnouts are higher in London than in the metropolitan districts areas even though at general elections that pattern is reversed (Rallings & Thrasher 1992). In France the long history of autonomous municipal governments in two geographical extremes – the area north of Paris and the Mediterranean south – might lead one to expect the survival of a more intense local political life. The Mediterranean area is also characterised by a continuing 'clientalist' political culture which produces a high mobilisation of voters at local elections (Medard 1981). Hence:

Proposition 8: The longer the history of autonomous municipal government in a region and/or the more that region is characterised by a clientalist political culture, the higher the level of local turnout.

This proposition can only effectively be tested for France. It would be unrealistic to separate parts of England on either of these dimensions, although it is likely that areas with above average rates of participation will become apparent from our later analysis of residuals and will be examined then. In France two dummy variables were created to distinguish communes in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais from all others and those in Provence-Alpes-Cotes

d'Azur and Languedoc-Roussillon from all others. In both cases there are positive simple correlations with turnout. Moreover, nine of the 10 municipalities with the best voting records in 1983 came from one or other of these regions, with 26 out of 32 communes in Nord-Pas-de-Calais and 37 out of 41 in Provence-Alpes-Cotes d'Azur and Languedoc-Roussillon having a turnout level above the national median.

One contextual aspect of English local politics which could be worth examining concerns the relationship between voters and their elected representatives. The number of electors in each council seat varies widely throughout the country and it may be the case that smaller electorates are associated with higher levels of turnout. Hence:

Proposition 9: The smaller the average number of electors in wards within a local authority, the higher the level of local turnout.

This proposition is quite strongly confirmed for England. It suggests either that the relatively close contact between electors and council candidates encourages greater participation or, of course, that smaller wards may be disproportionately concentrated in those types of area predisposed to above average turnouts for other reasons.

Multi-variate analysis

So far we have demonstrated that most of the independent variables used to examine our core propositions about variations in the level of turnout in France and Great Britain have been significantly correlated with the dependent variable. Now it is necessary to evaluate their respective and cumulative impact on turnout independently of any inter-relationships that may exist between them. The statistical technique of multiple regression analysis allows us to identify both which of the range of independent variables contribute to our ability to predict turnout and what their relative importance is.

The regression analysis for France (see Table 3) shows only those variables deemed to have an individual and cumulative impact on the explanation of turnout. All variables are as defined in Table 2 except for 'region' which takes the value of '1' for municipalities within the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Provence-Alpes-Cotes d'Azur and Languedoc-Roussillon areas and '0' for municipalities elsewhere in France. The overall ability to predict variations in turnout levels is quite high $-R^2 = 0.54$. The region of residence; the proportion of homeowners; the stability of the population; and the level of party competition each makes an almost equal and independent contribution to that proportion of turnout which we can explain. Cities which score highly on each of these dimensions do have the high predicted turnouts and those with the inverse characteristics do have lower turnouts. Cases in point are the example of Narbonne - predicted turnout 74.8 percent; actual turnout

Table 3. Regression analysis of local election turnout: France 1983

Variables	B	Betas	T	T signif.
% resident in same commune in 1975	+0.19	+0.21	+4.41	0.000
% manual workers in the population	+0.06	+0.09	+1.93	0.05
% self-employed	+0.35	+0.13	+2.98	0.003
% homeowners	+0.17	+0.25	+6.29	0.000
% foreigners	-0.24	-0.19	-4.43	0.000
number of party list candidacies	-1.86	-0.26	-7.05	0.000
years local majority party in power	+0.07	+0.13	+3.44	0.001
region	+5.7	+0.31	+7.81	0.000
	F = 55.98	S.E. 4.87	Adj. R ² = 0.54	

Table 4. Regression analysis of local election turnout: Great Britain 1991

Variables	B	Betas	T	T signif.
% manual workers in the population	-0.07	-0.13	-2.8	0.005
% self-employed	+0.3	+0.26	+5.14	0.000
% homeowners	-0.0	+0.22	+4.75	0.000
number of electors per councillor	+0.11	-0.27	-5.89	0.000
	F = 55.08	S.E. 4.07	Adj. R ² = 0.37	

76.7 percent - and Creil - predicted turnout 52.1 percent; actual turnout 54.1 percent.

In the regression analysis for England (see Table 4) only four variables from the initial list prove to be independently significant. The ability to predict turnout is more modest than in France - $R^2 = 0.37$ - but the variables of importance share similar characteristics. High levels of homeownership and self-employment are each positively correlated with turnout, as separately is the ratio of electors to councillors. Citizens really do seem to respond to the opportunity to vote in small electoral units. Turnout levels are close to that specified by the regression equation in, for example, Cardon (Cornwall) where there are above average numbers of homeowners and small business people and a mean ward electorate size of less than 2,000 - predicted turnout 51 percent; actual turnout 51 percent. Conversely, in Sandwell (West Midlands) which scores lower on such measures, the low level of turnout is also predicted by the model - predicted turnout 39 percent; actual turnout 39 percent.

Any regression model, however satisfactorily it acts as a predictor of the dependent variable, is only a 'best fit' among all the cases available. An inspection of plots of observed against expected values for turnout within our regression equations for England and France shows most cases falling relatively close to the diagonal (see Figures 3 and 4). The turnout in such municipalities demands, in one sense, no further explanation. They behave

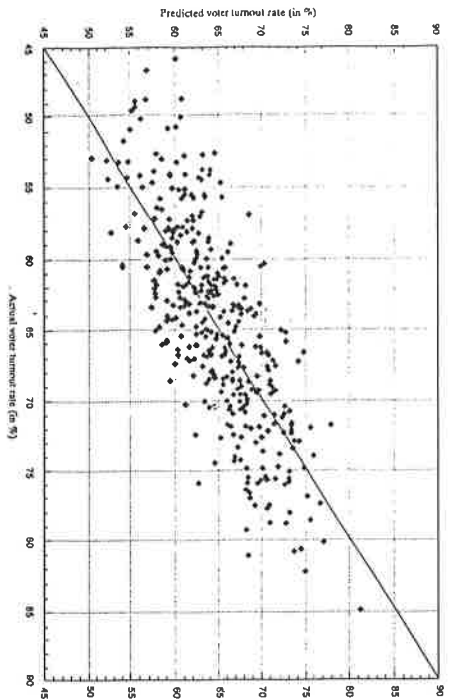


Figure 3. Relationship between actual and predicted voter turnout (France, 1983).

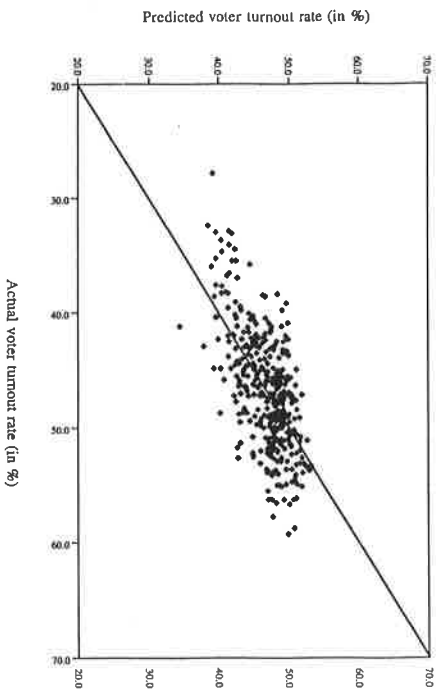


Figure 4. Relationship between actual and predicted voter turnout (Great Britain, 1990/91).

according to the expectation of the model for their country. However there are plenty of local authorities whose levels of turnout are some way above or below that which would have been predicted by the models. These 'outliers' are worth examining to see if they provide clues to some of the more qualitative characteristics which may determine variations in turnout. For both countries we have restricted our analysis to a selection of those cases

where the prediction is more than two standard deviations away from the actual turnout.

In France, three cities with a greater than predicted level of turnout are worthy of comment. In Draguignan (residual = +13 percent) the elections were characterised by an intense, even violent campaign by supporters of the long-serving mayor, Edouard Soldani, against the opposition candidate. In the event the Conseil d'Etat nullified the election result because of serious irregularities. In Sevres (residual = +14 percent) parties of both the left and right were involved in the mobilization of the electorate. Both thought they could win and both were using the elections as a trial of strength between internal factions. In Abbeville (residual = +11 percent) a 'chientalist' network had built up around the long-serving mayor, Max Lejeune. This ensured active support and participation from both the middle-class and municipal employees.

Two municipalities with below expected turnouts were Saint-Martin-d'Heres (residual = -14 percent) and Dijon (residual = -12 percent). Saint-Martin-d'Heres is located in a Department with a history of high electoral abstention and had been controlled by one party, with no threat to its tenure, for almost 40 years. Dijon, similarly, presented a non-competitive electoral environment together with a divided opposition.

In England turnouts much above or below the expected levels tend to fall into two categories. On the one hand, there are those municipalities whose turnout is consistently 'deviant' which suggests an almost cultural explanation for their behaviour.⁵ On the other hand, each election produces instances of local authorities where particular circumstances produce 'one off' unexpectedly high or low turnouts. It is possible to specify examples of each type from our 1990/91 data. Kingston-upon-Hull (residual = -11 percent) is consistently the English authority with the lowest absolute level of turnout. In 1991 it also recorded the largest residual. Hull is a geographically isolated city with a stable population and a long-standing, one party dominant Labour council. However, as the residual suggests, even these circumstances are not sufficient to explain its low levels of electoral participation. The authority with the highest turnout, Derbyshire Dales (residual = +9 percent), has been dominated by the Conservatives in local elections but also has a history of strong electoral participation at both local and general elections. Indeed, four of the fifteen highest turnouts in Great Britain at the 1992 general election were recorded by constituencies in Derbyshire.

The local authority with the second largest positive residual (+9 percent) was the London borough of Wandsworth. Its actual turnout level of 53 percent easily exceeded that for all previous elections and placed it third top amongst all 36 boroughs. What happened in Wandsworth in 1990 is easily explained, but it involves nothing which could contribute to our regression model. Simply, Wandsworth was in the cockpit of a dispute between central government and the local authorities over the new local tax, the 'poll tax'. Because of favourable treatment by government, allied with a policy of

privatising the delivery of many local services, Wandsworth was able to levy the lowest poll tax in the whole country. This was favourably received by Conservatives and furiously condemned by opposition parties. The subsequent frenetic election campaign had a clear and untypical impact on turnout. By contrast, Hart (Hampshire), an affluent middle-class local authority in the south of England with party political competition in all its wards, had a high negative residual (-9 percent) and an absolute level of turnout considerably less than at the equivalent elections four years previously. No ready explanation is available for this behaviour.

The question must now be asked whether these outliers have anything in common and, if so, whether such characteristics could be included in an improved model of turnout? Our discussion of cases for both Britain and France suggests that it is qualitative rather than quantitative considerations that are influential. Clearly, the salience and visibility of the local campaigns and aspects of local political culture are important, but obtaining sufficient information of this kind for all authorities is likely to prove impracticable. For the foreseeable future it will be possible to operationalise such factors only as a *post hoc* way of explaining turnout variations and differences.

Conclusion

What has been fascinating about our analysis is the way in which a good proportion of the variance in turnout between local authorities in England and France can be explained by the examination of the same propositions. At the level of both simple correlation and regression equations similar variables show themselves to be significant and to work in the same direction. Spatial factors, the vigour of party competition and the presence of property owners and business people all have a clear statistical influence on turnout in both countries. The one area of divergence has to do with the role of manual workers. In England local authorities with heavy concentrations of manual workers tend to be associated with low levels of turnout; in France they demonstrate higher rates of electoral participation. This variation is probably explained by the cultural differences in how parties and organisations of the left mobilise their supporters and in how they form and encourage networks which encompass many aspects of a worker's life.⁶ In other respects, however, those municipalities which tend towards high turnouts in England will show similar characteristics to those that do so in France, and vice versa.

Of course there are examples in both countries of authorities whose levels of turnout fail to match that predicted by our quantitative models. The explanation for their behaviour has a more qualitative base, but again similar factors seem to come to the fore. On the one hand, electorates in England and France do respond to especially high profile campaigns and issues to produce exceptional turnouts on a one-off basis.⁷ On the other hand, some

communes appear over time to have inculcated in their citizens a culture that predisposes them to recurrent patterns of unexpectedly high or low turnouts. Such instances are hard to predict statistically, but do merit further study if we are to improve our model of turnout and, more importantly, understand the processes whereby electoral participation might be increased.

However, there remains one crucial difference between England and France and that we have left until last. As is apparent in Table 1 and in our subsequent more detailed discussion, local turnout levels in France are absolutely higher than in England by some 15 to 25 percent. This applies both at the mean and in a comparison between high and low participating municipalities in the two countries. Moreover, such a contrast is not repeated in general elections. The turnout in the 1981 French Presidential election (72 percent) was just 8 percent above the mean figure for the 1983 municipal elections. The turnout at the British general election in 1992 (78 percent) was fully 31 percent higher than in the 1990-91 local elections. This similarity in national election turnouts suggests that the cross-national variations in local turnout are unlikely to be accounted for simply by the different distribution in England and France of those factors which we have shown to have a value in explaining intra-nation variations. The explanation for them must be sought in a separate cross-national analysis of institutional and systemic variables beyond the scope of this paper. However, some final speculative remarks are in order.

In France local government has a more secure constitutional base. Municipalities have wide discretion in the policies they pursue and mayors are figures of significance who can attract both loyalty and disfavour. Citizens identify with their communes and believe that their vote is worth casting in its own right (Thiebaut 1976). In England local government is seen more as a relatively powerless arm of central government whose decisions are constrained. In such circumstances the incentive to vote is less (Miller 1988). Even the structural features of the system in France encourage participation when compared with those in England. Voting in France takes place on a Sunday; in England on a normal working weekday - Thursday. In France, amendments to the traditional double ballot electoral system guarantee representation to all parties which obtain the support of ten percent of registered electors in the first round and of five percent of voters in the second round. In England the first past the post system of election heavily favours the largest party in any locality and can lead to opposition groups, and their supporters, feeling permanently excluded from the democratic process. That contrast alone is likely to account for a significant part of the difference in turnout.

Concern over the level of local turnout and that it may be declining has been articulated in both countries. In a comparative sense, however, France has little to worry about. Choosing local governments is still something that a majority of citizens value sufficiently to participate in. Turnout levels in England are not unambiguously dropping, but the continuing low absolute

level gives pause for thought. It may be that France can offer some pointers as to how this situation may be improved.

Notes

1. See, for example, Rallings & Thrasher (1990); Lancelot (1968); Hoffmann-Martinet (1992).
2. Turnout in France is defined as the number of votes cast as a percentage of the adult population. In England it is the number of votes cast as a percentage of the registered electorate.
3. Crewe 1981 shows a clear correlation (+0.55) to exist between the mean turnout rate in 19 democracies since 1945 and the mean proportion of votes cast for the traditional working-class party(ies).
4. Indeed Capron & Kruseman (1988) suggest that in any election there is an optimum number of parties – too few OR too many and electors will be disinclined to participate.
5. This claim for England is based on historical data contained in Rallings & Thrasher (1993). Similar information is not available for France.
6. Even in France, though, this variable is the least significant of those loading into the regression equation. It could be that trends towards working-class fragmentation in France might have led to a result similar to that for England if the French data had been collected a decade later.
7. Experimental evidence for this has been produced in Great Britain by Bochel & Denver (1971) and Pimlott (1973).

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