

The Effect of Educational Outputs and Outcomes on Local Turnout for State Education Chief

Section 1: Question

The question of why people vote is a timeless one in political science, and has been studied in countless contexts. There are many factors that influence whether people cast a vote in any given race in any given election, including voter age, socioeconomic conditions, prominence of interest groups, campaign tactics, and media coverage. Some theories of turnout have suggested that electoral participation can be motivated by the effectiveness of current policies and the conditions they have created. When people are unhappy with the state of society, some say, they are more likely to have political interest and therefore vote in an attempt to make things better.

In this project, I will investigate this phenomenon at the local level in the specific context of elections for state education chief – that is, the head bureaucrat in the state’s education agency. Races for state education chief are examples of down-ballot races, contests that are not listed first on the ballot and therefore are susceptible to the “roll-off” phenomenon, where fewer voters make a choice in these contests. On a local level, do people respond to negative educational outputs (lower-quality policy) and outcomes (lower-quality results) in their school district by paying more attention to these races and voting in higher numbers? Education is an interesting area in which to test this phenomenon, as it is a field in which we would expect people to be aware of and pay attention to local conditions. Because of this, looking at education specifically is a promising scenario in which to test the impact of conditions on down-ballot turnout.

Section 2: Goals

One broad goal I have in undertaking this project is to understand more about how

turnout works and how voters behave. I'm very interested in political behavior—why people vote for certain candidates, why they vote at all, and why so many of them do not vote—and I'm intrigued by the idea that turnout, on a very local level and for a race that clearly relates to the specific issue of education, could be motivated by poor educational conditions in that locality. Education policy is one of my specific interests within the field of public policy, and this project will illuminate some of the effects of local educational conditions, highlighting the ways in which they change citizens' interactions with government.

In terms of gaining general knowledge about political science and public policy, I also want to learn more about past work and theories by investigating the literature in these areas. I will read past studies on what affects turnout and theories of what motivates voters. I will also educate myself about indicators of educational quality and how educational success is measured, both in terms of policies and results, on the local level. As I have never completed an individual research project on this scale in political science, I think this project will be invaluable to me in terms of learning about methods and practices for research in the social sciences. A main goal of mine in completing this project is to develop the research and writing skills necessary for this type of work, which will help me greatly in future research endeavors.

Section 3: Significance of Research

Democracy is a messy process. With voter turnout so relatively low in the United States and so varied among different groups, it can seem as though crucial national issues are decided in an extremely chaotic environment. When voter turnout is heavily affected by poverty, education level, and age of individual voters, for example, our democratic system can seem somewhat random and unfair. Dissatisfaction with educational outputs and outcomes in one's own community, on the other hand, seems to be a more rational reason for turnout to be higher.

The choice of a state education chief is a crucial decision which has major repercussions on the state's school system and millions of residents of the state, and it's therefore very important to discover what motivates voters to cast a vote in these races.

Turnout has been studied extensively in political science (Geys 2006), and voter roll-off specifically has been studied in national races. Wattenberg et al. analyzed the roll-off phenomenon in House races, suggesting that voters do not vote on down-ballot races because they lack the necessary information to make a decision (Wattenberg et al. 2008). The relationship between higher turnout and negative news coverage of issues has also been studied, specifically by Martin, who suggests that negative coverage increases political participation (Martin 2008). My research will expand on this previous work by looking specifically at down-ballot turnout on the local level and whether it is motivated by conditions in a specific area.

Section 4: Preparation

Several of my classes in government have addressed topics that relate to issues of political participation and educational policy. This semester, I am taking Quantitative Methods (GOVT 391), which is giving me a solid foundation of skills and knowledge for quantitative studies in the social sciences. Next semester, I plan to take Research Methods (GOVT 301), which will address some of the more theoretical issues in research in the social sciences and also help me as I go about my summer work. I have also been working on research with Professor Manna over the course of the semester, and next semester he will be dealing with a similar question on a statewide level in his work. This work will also help prepare me for my research.

Section 5: Methods

To begin to answer this question on the local level, I will conduct a case study of North Carolina in the election of 2008. North Carolina, as one of only two states with both an elected

education chief and counties that are coterminous with school district boundaries, lends itself particularly well to this research.

Turnout in down-ballot races is commonly measured as a percentage of total ballots cast. I will use this measure of turnout as my dependent variable, gathering data on this for each county in the state. I will then gather data on educational quality, measured through a variety of indicators, as well as a number of control variables (poverty, age, interest group strength, etc.) for each county. I will use these data to answer my central research question, whether educational conditions in a locality affect turnout in these elections.

As a foundation for the study, I will read the political science literature on various aspects of voter turnout, examining what others have written about what factors motivate turnout and specifically how turnout works in down-ballot races. This survey of the literature will help me determine which variables to control for when examining whether educational outputs and outcomes affect turnout. I will also examine the literature on measures of educational quality in order to determine which measures to use to best describe educational conditions in a district.

I will conduct this project during the months of June and July (approximately June 1st – July 19th). I will complete most of the project at William & Mary, where I have access to the resources at Swem Library and will be able to consult with Professor Manna.

Section 6: Final Product

I will produce a data set with information relevant to turnout and education in each of the state's counties. I will also produce an article-length paper (25-30 pages) describing and analyzing my findings.

Section 7: Further Work

This project ties in with the research I've been doing for Professor Manna, and with his

goals of producing a conference paper involving not only his research on state-level turnout across the last 20 years, but my analysis of local turnout as well. I expect to continue this work into next year, either as an independent study, an honors project, a closer collaboration with Professor Manna, or some combination of these options.