Voter Turnout Stability in Comparative Perspective:

Over-reporting as Methodological Challenge

(draft version – comments welcome)

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Abstract

Our main purpose in this paper is to evaluate the quality of measurement in the CSES data. In the analysis of voter turnout stability we must first of all rely on questions about electoral participation of respondents. Meanwhile, over-reporting of voter turnout is a widespread and well-known phenomenon (CSES data are not an exception in this regard). Applying weights to samples seeks the general goal of making the sample more like the population at large, so following this general rule we weigh the CSES2 dataset in order to obtain voter turnout estimates that are identical (or at least very similar) to official results. Our main research question is whether weighting of survey data has an impact on the results of analysis of voter turnout stability.

As our theoretical expectations pertain both to micro-level variables as well as macro-level characteristics, we employ a multi-level research design. We study effects of both micro-level variables and macro-level variables. Our hypotheses are tested using CSES2 data. Our findings clearly show that weighting procedure has an impact on the results. Analyses run on samples which are differently weighted provide substantively diverse results. These findings constitute a challenge to majority of contemporary electoral research, because questions about reliability and validity of their analyses arise.

Introduction

Our aim in this project is twofold. Firstly, we investigate (micro-level) voter turnout stability. The main research question of the whole project is what are the covariates and determinants of voter turnout stability (on micro-level). We aim to answer the question why some citizens are electorally stable, while others repeatedly 'transit' from voting to abstention (or vice versa). We also intend to answer the macro-level question of why in some countries voter turnout stability is a widespread practice, while elsewhere it is a nearly non-existing phenomenon.

Secondly, we also discuss methodological challenges students of voting behaviour face while investigating (micro-level) voter turnout stability. Indeed, our second principal aim in this project is to evaluate the quality of the measurements in the CSES, especially cross-nationally and cross-culturally. In analysis of voter turnout stability we must first of all rely on questions about (self-reported) electoral participation of respondents. Meanwhile, over-reporting of voter turnout is a widespread and well-known phenomenon (CSES data are not an exception in this regard), which might have an impact on analysis of voter turnout stability. Moreover, there are significant cross-national differences as far as this phenomenon is concerned. Thus our aim is to study cross-national and cross-cultural differences in over-reporting in CSES data thoroughly. In this particular paper we mainly focus on the second issue – our main research question is whether weighting of survey data has an impact on the results of analysis of voter turnout stability.

Research question

As our key aim in this project is to investigate voter turnout stability, our dependent variables must be based on reported voting behaviour in the last two elections (t1 election – the previous,

penultimate election; t2 election – the last election). Following Cavanagh (1981) we propose a fourfold typology: core voters (who voted at t1 and t2); dropouts (who voted at t1 but did not vote at t2); mobilized voters (who did not vote at t1 but voted at t1); core non-voters (who did not vote at either t1 or t2). Due to such a construction of the dependent variable over-reporting of voter turnout becomes a major methodological challenge this project faces.

It is well known from many empirical studies (cf. Granberg and Holmberg 1991; Bernstein, Chadha and Montjoy 2001; Karp and Brockington 2005) that voter turnout in surveys is usually over-reported – it is much higher than officially registered. Two major reasons of over-reporting are put forward. Firstly, it is assumed that interviews are more likely to be successfully completed with voters than with non-voters; solely due to this fact voter turnout reported in the survey can be considerably higher than officially recorded. Secondly, it is claimed that there are people who say they voted when they really did not; their untruthfulness can increase reported voter turnout to a large extent.

People do not tell the truth about their past voting behaviour for various reasons. Most probably, in each individual case multivariate explanations are accurate. However, in the literature it is most often asserted that people over-report voter turnout because they either want to comply with the social norm or minimise cognitive dissonance (cf. Festinger 1957; Belli et al. 1999). Sometimes it is also argued that over-reporting might be a result of short memory span of respondents, but in our opinion this process is of minor importance (Belli et al. 1999; Abelson et al. 1992).

In some countries it is possible to validate voter turnout data (cf. Granberg and Holmberg 1991; Karp and Brockington 2005). This procedure enables correction of voter turnout data and permits more accurate, unbiased analysis. Unfortunately, in many countries these proceedings are for various

reasons prohibited or unachievable. In Poland for instance it is impossible to validate voter turnout data due to legal reasons. As a consequence of past events (electoral frauds under communist rule) secrecy of the ballot is solidly mandated by the Polish Constitution and is very strictly upheld in all elections. Thus, any access to official voter turnout data is austerely forbidden by law, which makes any validation procedures unfeasible.

Consequently, in many countries there is no effective tool for adjusting and correcting data on voter turnout (and its stability). Scholarly enquiry into this topic must rely on 'invalidated' information. But the quest for alternative methods of adjusting these imperfect data seems indispensable, and should be one of the major obligations of contemporary electoral research.

Figures 1-3 about here

According to the CSES data official and reported voter turnout differ quite significantly across countries. Even in the high voter turnout countries there is a difference between official information and data reported by respondents. In the low voter turnout countries the problem is even graver, because the gap is much wider.

If surveys provide inadequate data on voting, then fundamental questions about quality of electoral research arise. Reliability and validity of the eventual results can be severely jeopardized. In fact, it is an empirical question to what extent this very feature of most survey data available (i.e. over-reporting of voter turnout) is a real problem for analysis of voting behaviour. Our exercise aims to shed some new light on this issue.

To put it briefly, the main question here is whether the above mentioned imperfections of the CSES survey data, which are used in electoral research worldwide, have any impact on the results of

analysis of voting behaviour. It is not a trivial question – imperfect data might lead to erroneous results, which might lead to spurious, illegitimate claims about social and political reality. In fact, a lot of research has been conducted into voting over last decades, but reflection on the over-reporting phenomenon and its effects (on analysis into voting behaviour) is much smaller. We aim – using the example of voter turnout stability issue – to assess this problem empirically and estimate the effect of over-reporting (on the results of analysis of voting behaviour).

Research design

We aim to deal with the problem of imperfect dependent variable by adjusting the data. Applying weights to samples seeks the general goal of making the sample more like the population at large, so following this general rule we weigh the dataset in order to obtain voter turnout estimates that are identical (or at least very similar) to official results. Subsequently, we compare results of empirical analyses run on 'normal' and adjusted samples.

In the original CSES2 dataset there are three types of weights. Firstly, there are sample weights, which 'correct for unequal selection probabilities resulting from "booster" samples, oversampling of a particular population, procedures for selection within the household' (CSES Codebook). Secondly, there are demographic weights, which 'adjust sample distributions of socio-demographic characteristics' (CSES Codebook). And thirdly there are political weights, which 'reconcile discrepancies in the reported electoral behaviour of the survey respondents from the official vote counts' (CSES Codebook).

Figure 4 about here

In some election studies no weighting procedure is used – there was no need for weights in most such cases – 'this was proved by actually making weights, which turned out to make no difference' (CSES Codebook).

We can use sample or demographic weight (where it is possible) but they do not solve the problem of voter turnout over-reporting. Alternatively, we can use political weight, but political weights are constructed only in 4 election studies. Furthermore, sometimes political weights reconstruct election results only among respondents who declared voting (i.e. they provide 'correct' party vote estimates, but not voter turnout estimates → Portugal 2002). In addition, political weights do not take into account information about previous election, they are based on the last ones – while for our problem of voter turnout stability previous election are also important.

In order to deal with the problem of voter turnout over-reporting we construct new weight which reconciles discrepancies in voter turnout in last and previous elections. We call this new weight 'voter turnout weight' (W2). It is build on the basis of demographic weight. In the first step demographic weight is multiplied by Factor_t2 (W1 = Demographic weight * Factor_t2). Factor_t2 reconstructs voter turnout in last elections (t2 elections) in dataset weighted by demographic weight. In the second step W1 weight is multiplied by Factor_t1 (W2 = W1 * Factor_t1). Factor_t1 reconstructs voter turnout in previous elections (t1 elections) in dataset weighted by W1.

In constructing factor related to previous elections (t1) we take into account the fact that some respondents were not able to cast a ballot in these elections because of their age. In case of respondents who were too young to take part in t1 elections, weight in the second step does not change (i.e. W1 = W2 <=> Factor_t1 = 1). In constructing W2 we take into account the fact that

election cycles vary between countries – normally there are 4-years election cycles in most countries investigated, however in some cases election cycles are longer e.g. France, Philippines.

Voter turnout weight is constructed under the assumption that population eligible to vote in t1 election is equal to population eligible to vote in t2 election minus respondents who were too young to vote in t1 election. This technical example shows this logic for the 4-years election cycle: respondents eligible to vote in t1 election = CSES sample – (respondents, whose age is < 22). Due to data limitations we do not address the problem of voters who could vote in t1 election, but could not vote in t2 election (by the way this problem is more important for the macro-level investigation into voter turnout stability; in the analysis of micro-level voter turnout stability this issue can be ignored). Thus we assume that the group of voters who could vote in t1 election has not change throughout the election cycle.

As it was noted earlier voter turnout weight is built on demographic weight, and these two weights are highly correlated: Pearson's R (demographic weight, voter turnout weight) = 0.504.

Empirical analyses

The first step in our empirical analysis includes comparison of distributions of our dependent variable. Indeed, these distributions vary considerably when the voter turnout weight is applied. In some cases the differences are impressive.

Figures 5 and 6 about here

In general, applying the voter turnout weights results in outstanding enlargement of the group of core non-voters and spectacular decline of the group of core voters. The frequencies of the instable groups

(dropouts and mobilized voters) change relatively less. The effect of applying the voter turnout weight varies across countries. In some systems the distribution of the dependent variable changes dramatically, the proportions of the groups are entirely modified, and this is especially the case of the low voter turnout countries (where over-reporting is particularly high). In high voter turnout countries, especially those with compulsory voting, where turnout is almost universal, the effect is obviously weaker.

If applying the voter turnout weights results in substantial change of the dependent variable distribution, then it is plausible to hypothesise that this very fact has also an impact on the relationships between voter turnout stability (operationalised in the way described above) and its determinants or covariates. Thus in the next step of the empirical analysis we compare simple, bivariate relationships between the dependent variable and independent variables.

Figure 7 about here

These analyses show that applying the voter turnout weights might have an impact on bivariate relationships. The example provided shows perfectly this effect. In the Albanian (unweighted) data we do not see any statistically significant relationship between education and voter turnout stability; the distributions of the dependent variable in the three categories of education are almost identical (thus the differences between them are statistically insignificant). But after applying the voter turnout weight to the sample this relationship changes. The distributions of the dependent variable in the three categories of education are different. Furthermore, they are statistically significant.

Not surprisingly, applying the voter turnout weights also seems to affect more complex multivariate analyses. In our comparative analysis of the voter turnout stability we model this dependent variable as a function of several macro-level and micro-level factors. In order to assess their impact on the

voter turnout stability we employ multinomial logistic regression (with robust standard errors clustered by country), which – because of the nature of the dependent variable – seems to be the most appropriate statistical technique in our situation.

Figure 8-10 about here

The findings are quite intriguing. In fact, applying the voter turnout weight to the CSES2 sample does have an impact on multivariate analysis' results. Though the changes detected are not dramatic, in a few cases they are substantive. Weighting procedure changes for instance the effects of gender, church attendance, party identification or compulsory voting. Typically, they either become statistically significant or lose their statistical significance. Spectacular changes of the effect direction have not been observed.

When we move to the national level and we compare models run separately on national samples, we observe similar patterns. What is very intriguing is the fact that the effect of weighting is evident in both low voter turnout countries and high voter turnout countries. Figure 10 present data supporting this notion. The voter turnout weight seems to matter in the low voter turnout countries, such as Albania or Switzerland, but also in the high voter turnout countries, such as Belgium or Australia. The changes of the voter turnout stability patterns are not fundamental, but nevertheless they are worth noticing, as they modify considerably our understanding of this political phenomenon.

Conclusions

Over-reporting of voter turnout is very common in election studies datasets. The CSES data are not an exception in this regard. Over-reporting can cause problems. As evidence presented above shows,

analysis based on data with over-reporting problem could lead to false (or at least incorrect) results and conclusions. As validation procedures of the voter turnout information are in many countries prohibited or unachievable, other solutions and adjustments of the data must be implemented. Voter turnout weighting presented in this paper is a possible solution of voter turnout over-reporting problem.

However, applying the voter turnout weights does not seem to be 'neutral'. Quite the contrary, our findings clearly show that weighting procedure has an impact on the results. Analyses run on samples weighted in this manner provide results substantively different from those generated from unweighted or differently weighted samples. These somewhat imperfect results might lead to false, illegitimate claims about social and political reality.

Our findings are important not only for students of voter turnout, but for everyone who uses voter turnout questions (e.g. people studying party choice, voting behaviour, electoral volatility etc.). In fact, they constitute a challenge to majority of contemporary electoral research (where the problem of over-reported voter turnout is very seldom addressed). Questions about reliability and validity of these analyses arise. Would they provide the same results if voter turnout weights were applied?

This paper presents preliminary analyses. There is no doubt that more research into this phenomenon is necessary. We do not provide any definite solutions. Quite the contrary, we are interested primarily in showing the problem and provoking the scholarly debate on it. Our method of dealing with the problem of over-reporting is probably imperfect. All in all, we must rely on respondents' answers about voting behaviour in previous elections (because there are no other, better data). We know these declarations are sometimes very much biased and at odds with the official results. Weighting can correct the data as far as voter turnout distributions are concerned, but cannot validate

completely the information gathered during the interview. Nevertheless, our approach to the above problem is to use accessible data in the best possible way.

References

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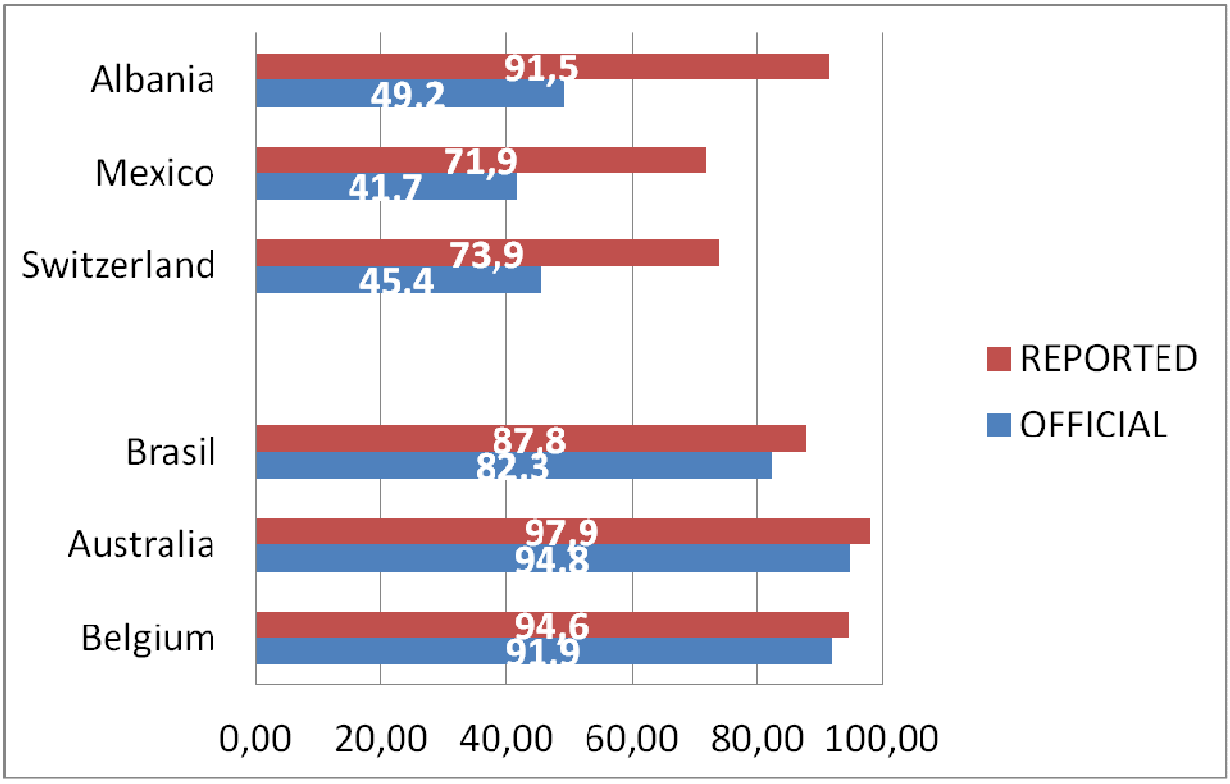
Comparative Analysis of Over-Reporting Voter Turnout in Five Countries. Journal of Politics 67: 825-840.

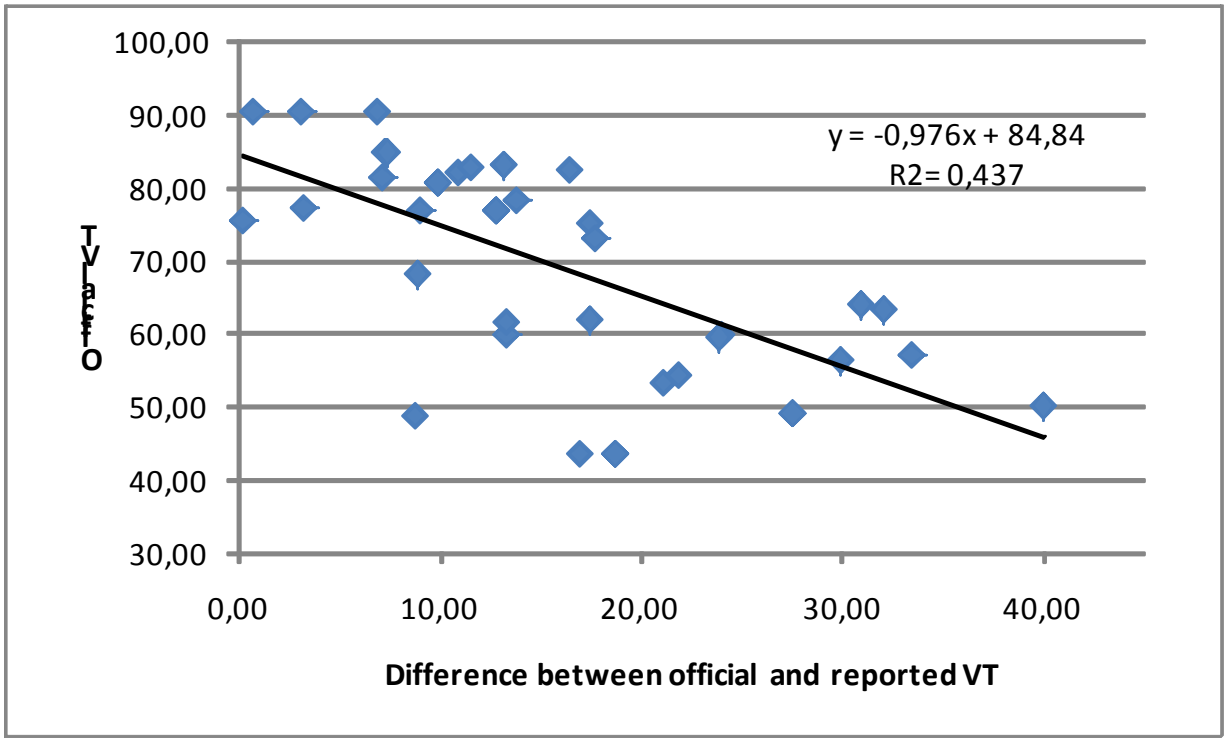
Annex

Figure 1. Official and reported voter turnout (CSES2).



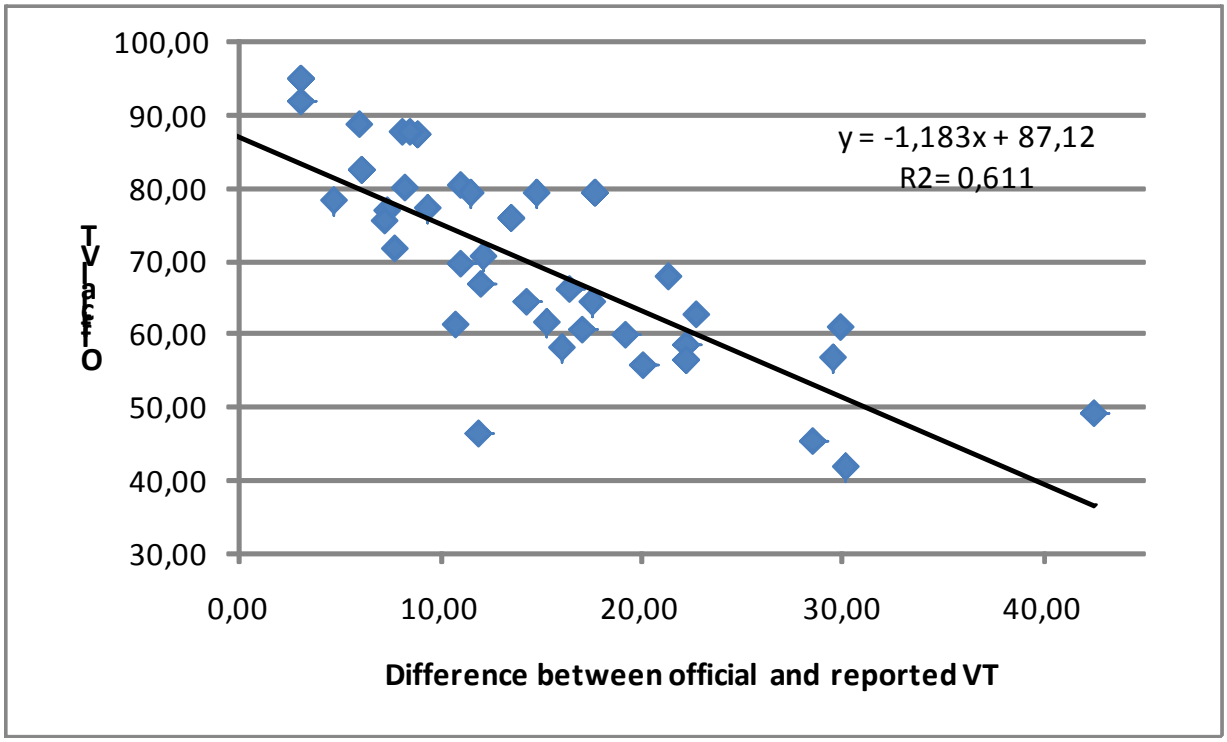
Source: CSES2.

Figure 2. Official and reported voter turnout (CSES1).



Source: CSES1.

Figure 3. Official and reported voter turnout (CSES2).



Source: CSES2.

Figure 4. Weights in CSES2

ELECTION STUDIES CONSIDERED IN OUR ANALYSIS	Demographic weight	Political Weight	No weight
ALBANIA (2005)			X
AUSTRALIA (2004)			X
BELGIUM (2003)	X	X	
BRAZIL (2002)	X		
BULGARIA (2001)	X		
CZECH REPUBLIC (2002)			X
DENMARK (2001)			X
FRANCE (2002)	X		
GERMANY (2002 Telephone)	X		
HONG KONG (2004)			X
HUNGARY (2002)	X		
ICELAND (2003)			X
IRELAND (2002)	X		
ISRAEL (2003)			X
NEW ZEALAND (2002)	X	X	
PHILIPPINES (2004)	X		
POLAND (2001)	X		
PORTUGAL (2002)		X	
PORTUGAL (2005)	X	X	
ROMANIA (2004)			X
SLOVENIA (2004)			X
SWEDEN (2002)			X
SWITZERLAND (2003)			X (samp)
GREAT BRITAIN (2005)	X		
UNITED STATES (2004)	X		
Total number	*13*	*4*	*11*

Source: CSES 2 Codebook

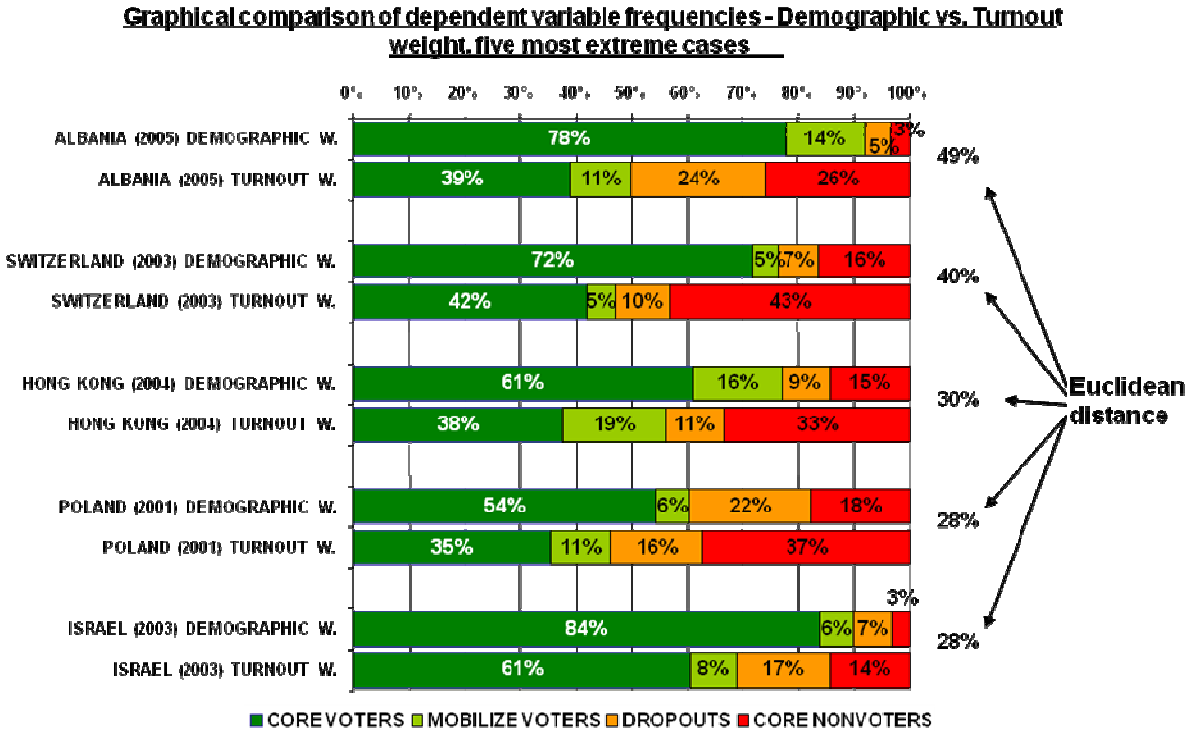
Source: CSES2.

Figure 5. Differences in frequencies of dependent variable.

	DEMOGRAPHIC WEIGHT				TURNOUT WEIGHT				EUCLIDEAN DISTANCE
	Core Voters	Mobilize Voters	Dropouts	Core Nonvoters	Core Voters	Mobilize Voters	Dropouts	Core Nonvoters	
ALBANIA (2005)	78%	14%	5%	3%	39%	11%	24%	26%	49%
SWITZERLAND (2003)	72%	5%	7%	16%	42%	5%	10%	43%	40%
HONG KONG (2004)	61%	16%	9%	15%	38%	19%	11%	33%	30%
POLAND (2001)	54%	6%	22%	18%	35%	11%	16%	37%	28%
ISRAEL (2003)	84%	6%	7%	3%	61%	8%	17%	14%	28%
ROMANIA (2004)	70%	12%	8%	10%	51%	9%	18%	22%	24%
PORTUGAL (2005)	76%	8%	6%	11%	58%	8%	9%	25%	23%
IRELAND (2002)	74%	10%	7%	8%	58%	8%	16%	17%	21%
PORTUGAL (2002)	73%	4%	8%	14%	57%	5%	10%	27%	21%
HUNGARY (2002)	72%	9%	9%	10%	56%	15%	9%	20%	20%
SLOVENIA (2004)	75%	4%	10%	10%	60%	4%	17%	19%	19%
UNITED STATES (2004)	65%	13%	6%	16%	53%	6%	15%	26%	19%
GERMANY (2002 Telephone)	90%	6%	3%	2%	76%	5%	13%	7%	18%
BULGARIA (2001)	69%	12%	9%	11%	55%	13%	12%	20%	17%
CZECH REPUBLIC (2002)	67%	9%	6%	17%	58%	5%	14%	23%	14%
DENMARK (2001)	94%	2%	3%	1%	82%	5%	7%	6%	14%
GREAT BRITAIN (2005)	68%	6%	9%	18%	58%	6%	10%	26%	13%
BRAZIL (2002)	84%	5%	6%	5%	75%	7%	8%	10%	11%
SWEDEN (2002)	82%	6%	5%	6%	74%	7%	8%	12%	10%
NEW ZEALAND (2002)	81%	5%	11%	3%	73%	4%	17%	6%	10%
FRANCE (2002)	75%	7%	12%	6%	69%	5%	18%	7%	9%
PHILIPPINES (2004)	78%	10%	6%	6%	74%	6%	12%	8%	8%
ICELAND (2003)	88%	9%	2%	1%	83%	6%	7%	3%	8%
BELGIUM (2003)	95%	2%	2%	1%	92%	3%	3%	3%	4%
AUSTRALIA (2004)	97%	2%	1%	0%	94%	2%	4%	1%	3%

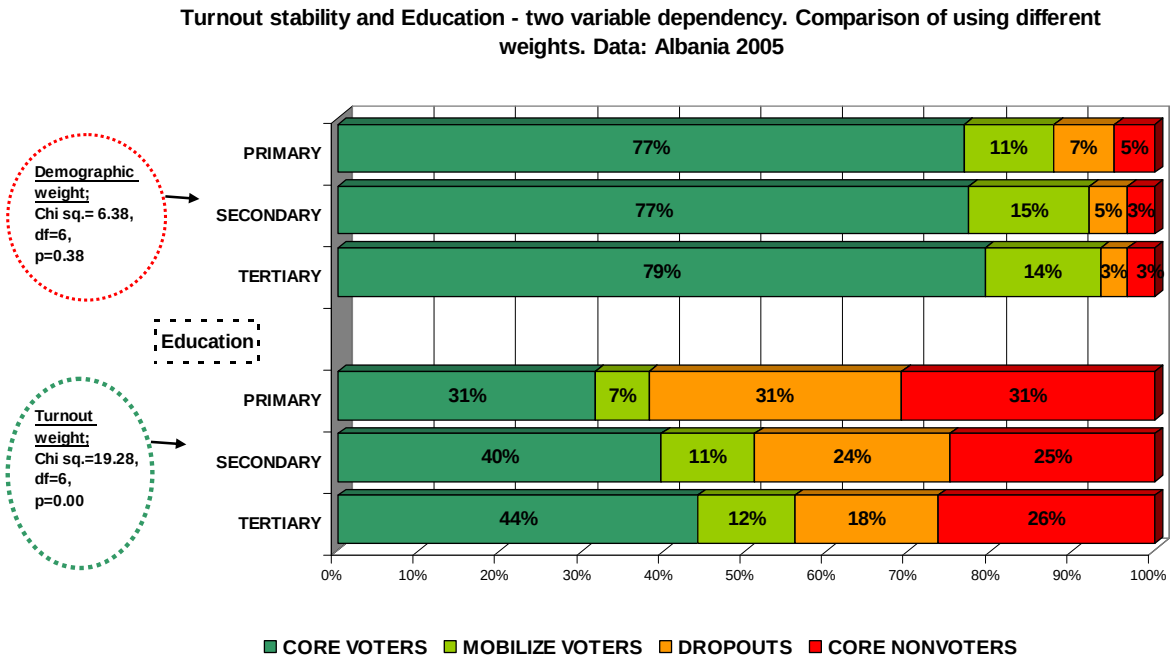
Source: CSES2.

Figure 6. Differences in frequencies of dependent variable – extreme cases.



Source: CSES2.

Figure 7. Differences in bivariate relationship – case of Albania.



Source: CSES2.

Figure 8. Differences in multivariate analysis (1/2). Multinomial logistic regression; dependent variable = voter turnout stability; robust standard errors clustered by country.

	DEMORAPHIC WEIGHT	TURNOUT WEIGHT	DEMORAPHIC WEIGHT	TURNOUT WEIGHT	DEMORAPHIC WEIGHT	TURNOUT WEIGHT
	MOBILISED VOTERS ~ CORE VOTERS		DROPOUTS ~ CORE VOTERS		CORE NONVOTERS ~ CORE VOTERS	
Age	-0,04**	-0,04**	-0,01**	-0,01**	-0,03**	-0,03**
Gender (0 – man, 1 – woman)	0,00	0	0,07	0,10	**0,13***	**0,12**
Education_1 (secondary level, 0-1)	-0,10	-0,12	-0,17	0,02	-0,26	-0,15
Education _2 (tertiary level, 0-1)	-0,23*	-0,3*	-0,49**	-0,32**	-0,88**	-0,79**
Church attendance	0,00	0,00	0,00	-0,01	-0,01*	-0,01*
Party Identification (0-1)	-0,46**	-0,49**	-0,57**	-0,57**	-1,17**	-1,18**
Assessment of the government's performance (0-1, 1 – good job)	-0,08	-0,16	-0,09	-0,06	-0,27*	-0,28**
Satisfaction with democracy (0-1, 1 – satisfied)	-0,13	-0,12	-0,15	-0,20	-0,22*	-0,32**
Who is in power can make a difference (1-5; 1 – it makes a difference, 5 – it doesn't make a difference)	**0,05**	**0,05***	0,10**	0,10**	0,19**	0,20**
Who people vote for makes a difference (1-5; 1 – it will not make a difference, 5 – it can make a difference)	-0,01	0,03	-0,18**	-0,14**	-0,20**	-0,11**
Significant parties not represented in parliament before the election (0-1, macro variable)	**0,35**	**0,82****	**0,62***	**0,18**	0,37	0,49
Compulsory voting (0-1, macro variable)	-1,12**	-0,84**	-0,87*	-1,22**	-1,53**	-1,67**
Old-new democracy (0-1, 0 – new dem., 1 – old dem., macro variable)	-0,33	-0,29	-0,26	-0,32	-0,33	-0,31
Electoral system (0-1; 0 – majority, 1 – proportional)	-0,16	0,07	0,13	-0,09	0,18	0,27
constant	0,12	-0,19	-0,91**	-0,17	0,16	0,69

Source: CSES2.

Figure 9. Differences in multivariate analysis (2/2). Multinomial logistic regression; dependent variable = voter turnout stability; robust standard errors clustered by country.

	DEMORAPHIC WEIGHT	TURNOUT WEIGHT	DEMORAPHIC WEIGHT	TURNOUT WEIGHT	DEMORAPHIC WEIGHT	TURNOUT WEIGHT
	MOBILISED VOTERS ~ CORE NONVOTERS		DROPOUTS ~ CORE NONVOTERS		MOBILISED VOTERS ~ DROPOUTS	
Age	-0,01**	-0,01**	0,01**	0,02**	-0,03**	-0,03**
Gender (0 – man, 1 – woman)	**-0,13***	**-0,12**	-0,06	-0,02	-0,07	-0,10
Education_1 (secondary level, 0 1)	0,16	0,03	0,08	0,17	0,08	-0,14
Education _2 (tertiary level, 0 1)	0,65**	0,49**	0,39*	0,47*	**0,26***	**0,02**
Church attendance	**0,00**	**0,01***	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
Party Identification (0-1)	0,71**	0,69**	0,60**	0,61**	0,11	0,07
Assessment of the government's performance (0-1, 1 – good job)	0,19	0,12	0,18**	0,22*	0,00	-0,10
Satisfaction with democracy (0-1, 1 – satisfied)	0,09	0,20	0,07	0,12	0,02	0,08
Who is in power can make a difference (1-5; 1 – it makes a difference, 5 – it doesn't make a difference)	-0,15**	-0,15**	-0,09**	-0,10**	-0,06	-0,05
Who people vote for makes a difference (1-5; 1 – it will not make a difference, 5 – it can make a difference)	0,19**	0,14**	0,01	-0,03	0,18**	0,17**
Significant parties not represented in parliament before the election (0-1, macro variable)	-0,02	0,32	0,25	-0,32	-0,27	0,64
Compulsory voting (0-1, macro variable)	**0,41**	**0,82****	**0,67****	**0,44**	**-0,25**	**0,38***
Old-new democracy (0-1, 0 – new dem., 1 – old dem., macro variable)	0,00	0,01	0,07	-0,01	-0,07	0,02
Electoral system (0-1; 0 – majority, 1 – proportional)	-0,34	-0,20	-0,05	-0,36	-0,29	0,16
constant	**-0,04**	**-0,88***	-1,07**	-0,87*	**1,03****	**-0,02**

Source: CSES2.

Figure 10. Differences in multivariate analysis. Likelihood ratio test.

	INDEPENDENT VARIABLES STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT IN MULTINOMIAL LOGISTIC REGRESSION ACCORDING TO LIKELIHOOD RATIO TEST							
	Elections with highest distance between frequencies of dependent variable depending on weighting procedure				Elections with lowest distance between frequencies of dependent variable depending on weighting procedure			
	Albania 2005		Switzerland 2003		Belgium 2003		Australia 2004	
	demo-graphic weight	turnout weight	demo-graphic weight	turnout weight	demo-graphic weight	turnout weight	demo-graphic weight	turnout weight
Age	**	**	**	**	**	**	*	*
Gender		**		*	*	**	**	**
Party identification	**	**	**	**				*
Church attendance		*						
Who is in power can make a difference			*	*		**	**	**
Who people vote for makes a difference		**	**	**		*	*	**
Education	*	**	**	**				
Assessment of the government's performance	*	**					**	**
Assessment of the government's performance		**						

Source: CSES2.