

# **Groups who vote and groups who don't: Political engagement in 6 countries**

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## Introduction

Voting in free and fair elections is the cornerstone of democratic governance. Yet, the past generation has seen a significant and substantial decline in voter turnout in many democracies. Most notable is the sharp decline in voting among the youngest generation of electors. While youth have displayed lower levels of voting for many years, two factors differentiate current trends from earlier periods. Voting turnout has declined sharply among this group throughout the 1990s and into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and levels of voter turnout are remaining much lower as the younger generation ages. If electoral turnout among today's youth remains at substantially lower levels, there is a risk of a growing disengagement from politics and public affairs, and a growing "democratic deficit". A number of other groups also appear to have consistently lower levels of voter turnout – new immigrants, aboriginal peoples and the poor are among the most notable. While these groups display lower levels of voting and other forms of electoral participation, there is less evidence that their participation has dropped sharply during the past decade.

There has been considerable research into the factors that account for lower levels of participation of identifiable groups. Studies have highlighted factors such as the lower knowledge of the political and electoral system and hence the increased costs of voting (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980), lower levels of efficacy (Avey, 1989), fewer candidates that reflect the characteristics of such electors (Black, 2002; Franklin, 2004), and insufficient or biased processes within political parties in nominating a more inclusive slate of candidates (Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991). Thus, the root causes of lower participation rest mainly in the character of social segmentation, and in the nature of the party system. During the recent period in which voter turnout has declined in society as a whole and among youth in particular, most analysts also point to broad changes in society, including such things as greater mobility (Texiera, 1987), the impact of television on the younger generation (Putnam, 2000), or broader value change that discounts the importance of engagement in one's community (Putnam, 2000). To the extent that declining turnout is a function of such social factors, reversing the current trends may prove very difficult.

A common feature of advanced democracies is the tendency on the part of governments, political parties, and election authorities to view with alarm the decline in voter turnout. Election administration authorities have for many years been the instrument to ensure that elections are conducted in a manner that is perceived as fair, and which lends legitimacy to the outcome. More recently, however, election administration authorities have begun to take on an expanded role, and to view themselves as responsible for increasing voter turnout in elections, and particularly to do so for those groups who either historically have lower levels of turnout, or for whom turnout has declined recently.

The project, of which this paper is a part, will examine the character and impact of electoral administrative practices across a number of advanced democracies. The purpose is to identify the salient methods that are used by election authorities to administer elections, and to identify the impact of such practices on the electoral participation of identifiable groups. The objective is to develop a better understanding of

the impact of alternative electoral administrative practices on the character of political representation. The study will examine the impact of various practices on the degree to which historically under-represented groups, such as the poor, youth, and women, are represented in the political process. The study will devote particular attention to the issue of the decline in voter turnout, and in other forms of political participation, that arise from electoral administrative practices, drawing comparisons with those cases in which voter turnout and political participation, particularly among historically under-represented groups, has not declined.

The study involves a comparison of the context and outcome of electoral administrative practices in six countries, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, the United States and the United Kingdom. These cases were chosen because they are all among the set of advanced industrial democracies, and yet represent a significant range in their electoral administrative practices and in the level of voter turnout. They also display a significant range in the degree to which historically under-represented groups participate at or near their national average participation rates. For example, Australia and New Zealand both use compulsory voter registration (described as electoral enrolment), and Australia has compulsory voting although New Zealand does not. Voter turnout in Australia averages 95%, whereas New Zealand averages 88% (Franklin, 1996). However, they have very different rates of Aboriginal representation in their legislatures (Archer, 2003c). Canada has relatively low and declining turnout, particularly among youth (Blais et al., 2002), and has recently introduced a major administrative change through the adoption of the national register of electors (Black, 2003a), as well as a new spending regime for parties and candidates (Bill C-24). The United States has recently experienced a highly controversial election due to electoral administrative practices and has recently passed significant legislation in an attempt to provide greater consistency nation-wide in the conduct of elections (Schier, 2003). Historically, and in the contemporary period, its unique voter registration requirements are said to account for significant slippage in voter turnout (Piven and Cloward, 1988). The United Kingdom has recently introduced major changes to its system of voter registration and has created an electoral commission with significant regulatory and educational responsibilities (Archer, 2002). Sweden is a case with a highly centralized election authority, including the use of a civil register for voter registration, and also has had among the highest levels of females elected to the national legislature (Norris, 1996). Thus, these cases taken as a whole provide significant variation on both the independent variable of electoral administrative practices, and the dependent variables of voter turnout and political representation of identifiable groups.

To a considerable extent this paper is a prelude to the analysis of the effect of targeted electoral administration practices on voter turnout. The purpose of this paper is threefold. The paper begins by examining the differences in voter turnout across six advanced democracies and looks to the role that “structural” election administrative practices play in affecting turnout. Secondly, the paper examines several determinants of voter turnout in 5 of the 6 cases, focusing in particular on the effect of gender, age and income. The data suggest that notwithstanding significant aggregate differences in turnout across the cases, there remain notable commonalities in voter turnout among identifiable groups. The third part of the paper, more speculative, suggests that variation

in group-based participation rates may be a function of targeted efforts of election administration agencies.

#### Voter Turnout and Structural Election Administration Practices

Table 1 presents data on voter turnout in the six countries under study, from 1990 through 2006<sup>1</sup>. Several things are evident from data on turnout. First, there has been a substantial decline in voter turnout in each of the countries under study over the past one and a half decades, although there has been a partial rebound in a number of cases recently. For example, turnout dropped almost 10 percentage points in Canada from 1993 to 2004, but recovered about 4 points in 2006. Turnout in the US dropped from 58 per cent in 1992 to 52 per cent in 1996, but since has recovered to about 60 per cent by 2004. Turnout in Britain dropped sharply between 1992 (78%) and 2001 (59.4%), with a slight recovery to 61 per cent in 2005. In contrast, in Sweden and New Zealand, turnout started substantially higher (about 85 per cent) and has dropped about 5 percentage points over the period. The least change has been witnessed in Australia, where turnout started very high (95.3%) and has remained stable over the period (94.3% in 2004). Thus, with the exception of Australia, voter turnout has been in decline. Second, notwithstanding the decline, there are consistent differences in voter turnout in the countries under study. Voter turnout is consistently lowest in the US, at about 50 – 60% of the eligible voters, it is about 60% in Canada and Britain, and is about 80% in Sweden and New Zealand. In Australia, turnout hovers at about 95%. These differences in voter turnout appear to be structural differences, which is to say that each case appears to have a norm, and one can see variation around that norm.

How is a country's voter turnout norm established? A strong case can be made that the situational norm is a function of the character of structural electoral administration practices, the two most notable of which are the electoral system and the system of voter registration. Although electoral administrative practices have long been of interest in developing democracies, such interest reached new heights in advanced democracies following the controversies surrounding the American presidential election of 2000 (Schier, 2003). At the centre of examinations of election administration practices is the effects of those practices in facilitating or discouraging political participation and in particular, voter turnout. One of the most consistent findings of two generations of research on political behaviour across a broad range of settings is that some citizens are more likely than others to be engaged and involved in politics (Franklin, 1996). The fact that levels of participation are much lower among certain groups, raises important questions in a democracy. If participation affects the policies adopted by the legislature, those individuals or groups who participate less in politics are less likely to have their interests effectively represented (Williams, 1998). In addition, to the extent that participation leads to the development of attitudes in support of the political community, a process referred to by Putnam (2000) as an element of social capital, then people with lower levels of participation are likely to have lower levels of social capital. This in turn

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<sup>1</sup> The data on voter turnout present turnout as a proportion of the registered electorate for each of the countries except the U.S. for the U.S., data are voter turnout as a proportion of the Voting Eligible Population. In the latter case, the Voting Age population is adjusted to take account of those who are not eligible to vote, such as those who are imprisoned, those who do not have citizenship, and the like. The data for the U.S. would be higher if registered voters were used, since the U.S. has notoriously low rates of voter registration.

can lead to higher levels of political cynicism, greater demands for electoral and political reform, and the growth of a 'democratic deficit' (for an extended discussion, see Archer, 2003a).

Scholarly investigations of effective representation, including studies of voter turnout, have emphasized the role that political institutions may play in contributing to citizen attitudes towards the political system. Perhaps the most important of these institutional arrangements is the character of the electoral system. Electoral systems have a major impact on the character of representation in a democracy. Giovanni Sartori (1968), one of the leading international experts on political parties and electoral systems, referred to electoral systems as "the most specific manipulative instrument of politics". Arendt Lijphart (1994) another leader scholar, has noted that "the degree of electoral disproportionality or proportionality responds very sensitively to the rules of the electoral system". Countries that use proportional representation and party lists generally produce elected representatives that more closely approximate the characteristics of the electorate than do those that use single member plurality systems. In addition, proportional representation with party lists also can play a role not only in increasing the proportion of elected representatives from historically under-represented groups, but also can ensure the election of a more balanced slate of candidates from different regions of the country than is often the case with single member plurality systems (see, for example, Norris, 1996). This has led a number of scholars in Canada to call for the adoption of a system of proportional representation either for greater demographic (Erickson, 1998; MacIvor, 2003), or regional (Milner, 1999) representation. It also has led the governments of a number of Canadian provinces, including British Columbia, Quebec, Prince Edward Island, Ontario and New Brunswick, to examine reforms to the electoral system. Thus, when seeking to explain consistent differences in voter turnout, the context provided by the electoral system is a good place to begin.

Of the 6 countries under review, 3 of them use the single member plurality, or first past the post electorate system (Canada, the US and the UK). These 3 cases have the lowest levels of voter turnout among the countries under review. Of the other cases, Sweden uses a List Proportional Representation electoral system, and New Zealand uses a mixed electoral system. It is tempting to assign much of the difference between these two cases and the 3 FPTP cases to the electoral system alone. However, the New Zealand case makes this somewhat more complicated, since it is the sole case in this group that had a change in the electoral system in the period under study. In the case of New Zealand, turnout initially increased in 1996, the first election conducted under the mixed electoral system. However, by 1999 turnout had dropped in New Zealand as well, and it continued to drop in 2002. Whether the new electoral system prevented an even further drop is speculative. Thus, while the evidence is somewhat mixed, there does appear to be an electoral system effect that operates to determine the norm of turnout in a country.

A second feature of election administration that has a bearing on voter turnout is the system of voter registration. The cases under study have a considerable range in the practices used for registering voters. In Sweden, all citizens are required to have a civil registration number, and this information is used in creating the electoral rolls. None of the other cases use a civil register. The existence of a civil register reduces considerably the "cost" of registering to vote, since this cost is effectively subsumed in the "cost" of maintaining one's civil information current. Australia and New Zealand both have

mandatory electoral enrolment, which in New Zealand is administered by the postal authority and linked to the address register, and in Australia is administered by the Australian Electoral Commission through a process referred to as the Continuous Roll Update. In both countries, the mandatory character of enrolment has led to the adoption of very vigorous administrative procedures for encouraging enrolment, including in the case of New Zealand registration through the internet. The other unique feature of voting in Australia is that it is compulsory, and hence the high level of voter turnout in that country may owe more to compulsory voting than to the electoral system, based on the Alternative Vote.

Voter registration in the United States is unique in that it is highly decentralized, being done in many cases by county officials, who in turn use practices that are unstandardized across counties within a state, and even more so from state to state. The United Kingdom uses a standardized registration system, the administration of which is fragmented among county officials. Canada has recently adopted a national register of electors, using a set of centralized administrative procedures to draw data from a variety of sources (for a comprehensive comparison of voter registration systems across these cases, see Archer, 2002).

Much of the scholarship on the effect of voter registration practices on electoral outcomes has come from studies of the United States. For example, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) found that in the United States, voter turnout was higher where the registration requirements were less stringent, and that more stringent voter registration requirements had a greater ‘distorting’ effect on the electorate – that is, those with lower education were most negatively affected by more stringent registration requirements. Subsequent analysis (e.g., Kleppner, 1982; Teixeira, 1987; Piven and Cloward, 1988; Kornbluh, 2000), substantiated the analysis of Wolfinger and Rosenstone. Indeed, Piven and Cloward (1988) argued that such restrictive practices have long-term consequences by changing the character of the party system itself, and through it the system of democratic representation. In a recent analysis of the effect of the continuous voter register in Canada, Black (2003a) argued that this administrative change has had a negative impact on youth registration, and thus, youth electoral participation.

The data on voter turnout across the 6 cases would appear to be consistent with a “voter registration effect”. The country in which registration is most difficult, the US, experiences consistently lower turnout than all other cases. The two cases with compulsory registration have the highest voter turnout rates, and the additional provision of compulsory voting places Australia much higher in overall turnout than the other cases. The one case that uses the civil registry, Sweden, has turnout at a rates similar to New Zealand with compulsory registration. The civil registry system in its effect is similar to a compulsory form of registration, since being kept off the civil registry has been equated with social death, precluding one from accessing a wide range of public services such as education, health care, driver’s licence and the like. The voter registration systems in Canada and the UK, both of which place much of the onus for registration on the electoral authority, but which make it relatively easy for a citizen to remain off the register, have relatively low rates of participation.

While this analysis is more suggestive than definitive, it suggests that countries do develop their internal norm of civic engagement and electoral participation, and that this norm is reflected in the institutional arrangements in place that either foster voter turnout,

or do not. In the cases under study, the countries that had a norm of fostering voter turnout tended to do this with multiple institutional provisions – they tended to have electoral systems that in general are associated with higher turnout, and they also had voter registration procedures that were associated with turnout. In contrast, those cases that did not subscribe to the norm of high voter turnout, or perhaps rather subscribed to the norm of voter choice in turnout, tended to have institutional arrangements both with respect to the electoral system and to the system of voter registration that provided the option to not vote.

#### Who Votes and Who Doesn't?: Variation within the Norm

Writing two generations ago, Elmer E. Schattschneider in The Semi-Sovereign People (1964) observed that much of the character of political contestation is about mobilizing supporters into the active electorate, and mobilizing opponents out. The dysfunctional character of democracy emerges, according to Schattschneider, when the parties concentrate on mobilizing certain, consistent groups into the electorate, and leaving others outside, unheard, unheeded and unrepresented. The second part of this study involves the analysis of data on electoral participation over time in each of the countries under review. Emphasis will be placed on examining the participation rates of 'targeted' groups, and of individuals from groups that are historically under-represented in the representational process.

The data for this part of the analysis will be derived from various election study data sets and analyzed using regression analysis to assess the change in self-reported voting turnout among groups over time. We expect that groups that are historically under-represented in the representational process will be less likely to vote within each case being studied. In short, although the countries under review demonstrate substantial differences in overall rates of voter turnout, it is hypothesized that within these differences in aggregate turnout, there is a consistent pattern of under-representation, or at least of under-involvement, of a consistent segment of the electorate.

The data we have chosen for the analysis, national election studies, provides some limitation on our ability to examine all of the groups of the "socially dispossessed" that we wish to examine. For example, although we expect that in those countries with a substantial Aboriginal population we would observe lower rates of participation from this population, generally the number of Aboriginal respondents in national election studies is too small to produce reliable results. Consequently, we have not included an Aboriginal category in this analysis. Similarly, in general we are interested in examining whether new immigrants are well-integrated into the political process and whether their participation rates are comparable to the national norm. However, data from national election studies tend not to provide a sufficiently large sample of new immigrants for reliable results. As a result, we have not included new immigrants as a variable in the analysis.

The variables that have been included are age (or more precisely, youth), low income, and gender. The age variable is used because many recent studies have identified youth non-voting as a major determinant of the decline of voting over the past generation. Income is used because studies of voter turnout often have identified income as the primary factor leading to lower political engagement, and also because income can act as a surrogate for a broader set of variables tapping into the concept of social and economic exclusion. For the purposes of this analysis, a simple dichotomous variable measuring the

bottom fifth income group is contrasted with all others. The third independent variable used is gender. Although women still comprise much smaller proportions of elected officials compared to men, studies have indicated that women and men tend to participate at similar rates in most advanced democracies. Therefore, we use the gender variable to serve as a control, and expect that it will not produce a statistically significant effect on voter turnout in the countries under study.

Before undertaking the analysis, two methodological notes should be highlighted. First, in order for the model to explain variation in an outcome, there must be sufficient variability among the sample population in the dependent variable. In short, there must be something to explain. The voter turnout variable in the Australian election study does not provide enough variation, due largely to the overwhelming high turnout rate in Australian elections. Compulsory voting has the intended result that the vast majority of Australians vote. That fact, together with the general over-reporting of voting in election surveys, results in there being too little variation in the vote turnout variable for meaningful analysis of the Australian case. Therefore, it is excluded from the analysis.

The observation about over-reporting of voting in Australia has a more general effect in the other cases. It is important to bear in mind that all surveys of voters tend to over-report voter turnout among survey respondents than is observed in the official tallies of the election authority. The turnout reported in the surveys used in the present analysis is reported in Table 2. When compared to the analysis reported in Table 1 on official turnout rates, one observes that the over-reporting of turnout ranges from approximately 10% to 20%. Consequently, in all of the studies, the resulting coefficients are likely to be less robust than they might otherwise be in the event the dataset had less non-random error.

(Table 2 about here)

Using OLS regression analysis, we will model turnout using a dichotomous variable measuring whether a respondent reported to have voted in the election of interest. The following regression equation was used in all five countries analyzed:<sup>2</sup>

***Vote turnout = constant + gender(female) + annual household income (lowest 18 to 20%) + age(18 to 25) + age(26 to 35) + age(36 to 45) + age(56 to 65) + age (66 and over) + e***

One should note that the question wording for such variables differ across election studies, but all are recoded so that a respondent who said they voted is given a value of 1 while a non-vote is given a value of 0. The independent variables in the model include gender, age and annual household income. Gender is recoded so that women are given a value of 1 and men a value of 0. Since we are interested in assessing the turnout rate of low income electors, we recode annual household income into a dummy variable with all those respondents with an income in the bottom 15-20% given a value of 1 and all others given a value of 0.<sup>3</sup> For age, five dummy variables are created with age groups of 18 to

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<sup>2</sup> Australia was not included in this portion of the study because of high level of voter turnout induced by its mandatory voting laws.

<sup>3</sup> Readers should note that in some countries (Britain and Sweden) the low income variable included electors in the bottom 25% of the income distribution due to pre-existing categories.

25, 26 to 35, 36 to 45, 56 to 65 and 66 and over. All coefficients produced from the regression model are compared to the voting rate of voters aged 46 to 55.<sup>4</sup>

### Findings

#### *Canada*

The turnout models for Canada from the general elections of 1993 to 2006 indicate that low income and young Canadians were less likely to vote when compared to middle to high income and older Canadians. For each of the countries under review, we are interested both in the overall strength of the variables of gender, income and age, and also in changes that occur in the relative strength of the coefficients across the period of study. The data from Canada in 1993 indicate that of the 3 independent variables, the strongest negative effect is among the youngest voters (see Table 3). In relation to those 46 to 55 years of age (the comparison group), the group of 18 to 25 year-olds were almost 18 per cent less likely to vote in the election. Similarly, those age 26 to 35 years of age were almost 14 per cent less likely to vote. The next oldest group is about 6 per cent less likely to vote than the comparison group, and neither of the oldest two categories produce statistically significant differences.

(Table 3 about here)

The lowest income group also was less likely to vote in Canada in 1993 compared to all those who were outside the bottom income quintile. Table 3 indicates that this group is about 9 percentage points less likely to vote compared to the non-poor. The gender variable does not reach statistical significance in 1993, indicating that controlling for income and age, women and men are equally likely to report voting.

Several observations can be made about the trend in determinants of turnout over time in Canada. First, gender remains statistically insignificant as a predictor of voter turnout in each election. Second, with respect to the age variables, the youngest age group shows a fairly consistent disinclination to turnout in each election of approximately 15 to 18 percentage points until 2006, when the effect dropped to about 11 percentage points. Those in the 26 to 35 age group also showed a similar trend, with voting disinclination ranging from about 10 to 14% between 1993 and 2004, and dropping to 7 per cent in 2006. In contrast, the income trend was more mixed over time. The lowest income group was about 9 per cent less likely to vote in 1993, a margin that increased to about 14 per cent by 2004, and then dropped to 7 per cent in 2006. Thus, while the age effect was relatively constant between 1993 and 2004, the effect of low income actually was increasing. Nonetheless, in both instances, the 2006 election demonstrated lesser income and age effects.

#### *United States*

Data from the United States are taken from the American National Election Studies for the presidential elections from 1988 to 2004. Beginning with the 1988 study, the data demonstrate an age effect fairly similar to Canada's (see Table 4). The youngest group of electors was about 18 percent less likely to vote than those aged 46 to 55, while the next youngest group was about 12 per cent less likely to vote than the comparator group. The effect of income, while in the same direction, is stronger in the US than in Canada, with the poorest fifth of the electorate more than 20 percent less likely to vote

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<sup>4</sup> In the Swedish election studies, age was categorized on a six point scale. As a result, the dummy variables include the age groups: 18-21, 22-30, 31-40, 51-60 and 61 and over with 41 to 50 being the comparison variable.

than other income groups. As in Canada, gender had no statistically significant impact on turnout.

(Table 4 about here)

Over time, several important trends can be seen in the effect of these determinants of voting. First, as in Canada, gender continues to be a non-significant factor in turnout, controlling for income and age. Women are no more or less likely to vote than men. Second, there has been no consistent change in the effect of income on voting in the U.S. The poor were about 22 per cent less likely to vote at the outset of this time period, and remained 20 per cent less likely to vote at the end. With respect to age, in many respects the data from the U.S. mirror the changes taking place in Canada. The youngest age group saw its voting disinclination drop from about 18 per cent to about 14 per cent, a somewhat less decline than seen in Canada. The second youngest age group had a relatively constant effect from 1988 to 2000, but in 2004 its turnout disinclination was no longer statistically significant. Whether this reflects a momentary change related to the 2004 election, or reflects a longer term reduction in the age effect, is uncertain.

#### *New Zealand*

The data from New Zealand, taken from New Zealand Election Studies from 1990 to 2002, reveal several differences from the Canadian and American cases (see Table 5). Beginning with 1990, the data show that while low income has a negative impact on voter turnout, in New Zealand this impact (about 7 percentage points) in 1990 was somewhat less than in Canada in 1993, and much less than in the United States. In a word, while age contributes to social stratification, the impact of social stratification is felt less strongly in the political system, at least as reflected in the process of voting in elections. Younger electors also were less likely to vote in New Zealand than their older counterparts, but again the differences were less in New Zealand in the early 1990s compared to Canadians and Americans in similar times.

(Table 5 about here)

Over time, the effect of low income on voter turnout continued to decline in New Zealand, dropping from a gap of about 7 percent in 1990 to 4 per cent in 1999. By the 2002 election, being in the lowest income quintile had not statistically significant impact on turnout. The effect of gender, as in the other cases under review, continued to have little measurable effect on turnout. The one exception appears to be from the election in 1999, where women were slightly less likely than men to vote. The age effect in New Zealand has been somewhat different than that observed in Canada and the U.S. Although the effect of age for the youngest cohort was less than their counterparts in Canada and the U.S. at the start of the period, it has remained relatively constant throughout the period. Likewise, the second youngest age group, which began the period with a voting turnout gap of about 9 percentage points, has seen the gap increase to about 12 percentage points. Thus, the voting disinclination of younger electors in New Zealand has not been declining, but rather has remained relatively stable throughout the period under review.

#### *Sweden*

Data presented earlier in Tables 1 and 2 indicated that turnout in New Zealand was in the relatively high range in comparison with the other cases under review, and that reported turnout was about the 90 per cent level. The data on determinants of voter turnout, presented in Table 6, indicates that social segmentation appears to have a much

weaker effect in Sweden than elsewhere. For example in 1991, the youngest age group was about 12 per cent less likely to vote than the comparator group of those aged 41 to 50 years. But the effect of age for those in the next age group, 22 to 30 years, was statistically insignificant. Neither gender nor income had a significant effect on voting in Sweden in 1991.

(Table 6 about here)

Regression results over time indicate that although the 18 to 21 age group was a significant factor in the 1998 and 2002 elections, the relative impact of the variable on electoral participation was modest. Also of note, survey data from the 2002 election indicates that low household income was a significant determinant of vote turnout for the only time in the four elections included in the study. Rather than suggesting a trend towards to increased importance of income, this observation may be reflective of more temporary circumstances associated with the 2002 election in Sweden. Thus overall it appears that in Sweden, being young, poor or a women does not effect whether you turnout to vote. This also is confirmed by the relatively weak explanatory power of the models in Sweden over the four elections analyzed. Another way of describing this finding is that in Sweden, the norm of voter turnout is a norm shared widely by various types or groups of citizens. Voting in elections is an experience that provides a common bond of citizenship across groups of electors, rather than being a feature that divides groups from one another.

#### *United Kingdom*

In the United Kingdom, survey research from the 1997, 2001 and 2005 general elections indicates that income and age are important determinants to turnout (see Table 7). During the 1997 election, living in a household with a low annual income or being aged 18 to 25 or 26 to 35 were significant factors in suppressing voting turnout. Also, unlike most of the other cases under review, age continues to be a significant determinant of voting in the UK, for the oldest age groups, although the direction of the relationship changes from negative for young voters to positive for old voters. As in the other cases under review, women are no more or less likely to vote than men.

(Table 7 about here)

In the elections of 2001 and 2005, it appears that the effect of income on voter turnout has remained relatively stable, depressing turnout by about 14 or 15 percentage points. Similarly, there has been no consistent decrease in the effect of age on voter turnout, and if anything, perhaps a slight increase in the overall effect of age, as older voters have an ever greater likelihood of voting in 2005 compared to 1997. Lower reported turnout rates among younger voters, particularly those aged 18 to 25, has remained a consistent factor across the three elections analyzed.

#### Discussion

The analysis leads to a number of observations about the character of voter turnout in this group of advanced democracies. Whereas the data in Table 1 demonstrated that turnout varies considerably across the 6 cases, the analysis of the determinants of turnout showed that there exist substantial differences in the effects of having certain group characteristics. Furthermore, and significantly, the strength of group-based effects did not vary randomly. Rather, those countries with lowest aggregate turnout rates also tended to have the greatest group effects in turnout rates. Thus, in those settings where there is a more general laissez-faire approach to voter turnout, the presence of voting

disincentives, or perhaps also the lack of voting incentives, appears to have a disproportionate effect on certain groups, particularly in this analysis, on the poor and on the young. The data also suggest that these effects are not necessarily fixed, but in fact can vary over time. Some of the cases showed evidence of substantial and consistent decreases over time in the relative impact of either the income or the age effect. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the causes for this decrease, an avenue for future research is to examine the degree to which such decreases may result from targeted efforts on the part of the election authority.

Several observations emerge in the cases where turnout is relatively high. In both New Zealand and Sweden (the cases in this study with relatively high voter turnout), income tends to have a lesser impact on voting than where turnout is relatively low. Several possible explanations present themselves for this finding. It may be that income has a small effect because income differences, in an absolute sense, are relatively modest. Alternatively, it may be that low income groups are effectively mobilized into the voting process, through either structural features of election administration (such as compulsory registration and/or voting) or targeted activities, such as superior voter education campaigns and the like.

The above discussion is not to suggest that all group effects are necessarily eliminated where aggregate turnout is relatively high. The cases of New Zealand and Sweden demonstrate that important group differences can persist even where overall turnout is similar and relatively high. For example, data from New Zealand showed that the age effect continues to persist, and is just as strong, or perhaps even stronger, among 26 to 35 year olds as it was for 18 to 25 year olds. These groups continue to have significantly lower rates of voting than their older counterparts. In contrast, in Sweden the effect of age is modest at best, and in many of the elections under study, there was no consistent effect of age.

For the countries with lower overall rates of voter turnout, the data suggest that the effects of age and income tend to run in similar directions. That is, where turnout is relatively low, the poor and the young tend to be particularly affected by low turnout. That said, it also appears possible to separate these effects and to have a relatively greater degree of equality in one of these factors or the other. For example, Britain was the case that most clearly demonstrated stable and high negative impacts on turnout of being young and of being poor. In contrast, in the United States, the negative impact of being young occurred while the effect of being poor was relatively high and constant. In short, while the poor continued to be highly demobilized, the young were less so over time. In Canada, there seemed to be some evidence that while the effect of being poor was moderately negative on turnout, the effect of being young decreased. Further, in the most recent election, the effect of both being poor and being young decreased in Canada. While the effects of these two variables together did not approach the low levels seen in Sweden, by the 2006 Canadian election, the effects of income and age were similar to what was observed in New Zealand in 2002.

This raises the question of whether it is possible to eliminate entirely the effect of social segmentation on voter turnout. Two observations from the analysis suggest that this type of outcome may indeed be achievable. First, the consistent finding across the cases and over time that gender has no significant impact on voter turnout suggests that a once-significant predictor of turnout can, over time, disappear from significance. Surely

there has been a complex set of factors that have led to this outcome, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the reasons for this change. Nonetheless, the simple observation stands that a once-significant determinant of voter turnout is no longer significant.

Second, the data demonstrated that in Sweden, the measures of social segmentation, whether they were based on gender, on income, or on age, each had little or no significant effect on voter turnout. In short, the outcome already has largely been achieved in some settings. Whether it can be achieved in other settings is a result of a complex set of factors, including whether there is a desire to eliminate such differences in turnout. One factor in this set is the activities of the national election authority in developing activities aimed at decreasing the gap between groups who participate and groups who do not. Future analyses in this project will attempt to isolate strategies used by such authorities, and measure their effects.

**Table 1****Voter Turnout in 6 countries, 1990 – 2006**

(Cell entries are turnout as a percentage of the registered electorate)

Year	Country					
	Canada	US	UK	Sweden	Australia	New Zealand
1990					95.3	85.2
1991				86.7		
1992		58.1	77.8			
1993	69.6				95.8	85.2
1994				88.1		
1995						
1996		51.5			95.8	88.3
1997	67.0		71.5			
1998				81.4	95.2	
1999						84.8
2000	61.2	54.3				
2001			59.4		94.9	
2002				80.1		77.0
2003						
2004	60.9	59.6			94.3	
2005			61.4			80.3
2006	64.7					

Source: Data for Canada, United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand are from International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Voter Turnout, available at: <http://www.idea.int/vt/>. The data for these countries use the number of registered voters as the denominator. These data typically result in slightly higher reported turnout than when using the Voter Age Population as the denominator, with the distortion being larger as the number of non-registered voters increases. For the United States, the data are from: The Committee for the Study of the American Electorate (CSAE), “President Bush, Mobilization Drives Propel Turnout to Post-1968 High”, pp. 1 – 23, available at: <http://www.fairvote.org/reports/CSAE2004electionreport.pdf>

**Table 2****Reported Voter Turnout in election surveys in 5 countries, 1990 – 2006**

(Cell entries are turnout as a percentage of the registered electorate)

Year	Country				
	Canada	US	UK	Sweden	New Zealand
1990					89.8
1991				92.8	
1992		75.4			
1993	87.4				92.5
1994				91.9	
1995					
1996		76.6			95.0
1997	82.2		78.8		
1998				88.1	
1999					95.2
2000	83.2	76.1			
2001			72.7		
2002				89.1	95.2
2003					
2004	86.7	78.5			
2005			74.1		
2006	90.7				

Source: Data are from the various National Election Studies datasets

**Table 3 : The Effect of Gender, Income and Age on Vote, Canada (1993-2006)**

	1993	1997	2000	2004	2006
Constant	.949*** (.018)	.868*** (.031)	.884*** (.021)	.905*** (.016)	.923*** (.014)
Women	.004 (.003)	-.011 (.006)	-.025 (.004)	.023 (.003)	.006 (.003)
Low Income	-.090*** (.017)	-.111*** (.031)	-.127*** (.022)	-.142*** (.019)	-.073*** (.018)
18 to 25 years old	-.178*** (.025)	-.154*** (.047)	-.179*** (.033)	-.169*** (.026)	-.114*** (.027)
26 to 35 years old	-.138*** (.020)	-.117** (.035)	-.149*** (.025)	-.103*** (.021)	-.073** (.019)
36 to 45 years old	-.060* (.019)	-.011 (.034)	-.049 (.024)	.064** (.021)	-.022 (.016)
56 to 65 years old	.018 (.026)	.040 (.044)	.045 (.028)	-.028 (.019)	.034 (.017)
66 years and over	.048 (.027)	.093* (.046)	.063* (.030)	.108*** (.020)	.042 (.018)
R-square	.047	.053	.067	.075	.029

Standardized Coefficients, OLS Regression

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

Source: 1993, 1997, 2000, 2004 and 2006 Canadian Election Studies

**Table 4: The Effect of Gender, Income and Age on Vote, United States (1988-2004)**

	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004
Constant	.791*** (.017)	.882*** (.037)	.840*** (.032)	.871*** (.032)	.884*** (.036)
Women	-.009 (.022)	-.023 (.025)	-.004 (.006)	-.025 (.006)	.046 (.028)
Low Income	-.215*** (.029)	-.206*** (.034)	-.165*** (.030)	-.203*** (.033)	-.199*** (.036)
18 to 25 years old	-.186*** (.044)	-.207*** (.050)	-.141*** (.049)	-.154*** (.047)	-.139** (.051)
26 to 35 years old	-.124*** (.037)	-.152*** (.042)	-.110** (.037)	-.124*** (.038)	-.041 (.046)
36 to 45 years old	.009 (.038)	-.081* (.045)	-.065 (.036)	-.103** (.036)	-.090* (.047)
56 to 65 years old	.025 (.043)	.014 (.049)	.003 (.041)	.018 (.040)	.005 (.047)
66 years and over	.057 (.041)	.004 (.047)	.063 (.038)	.014 (.040)	.000 (.048)
R-square	.098	.089	.056	.074	.059

Standardized Coefficients, OLS Regression

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

Source: 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004 American National Election Studies

**Table 5: The Effect of Gender, Income and Age on Vote, New Zealand (1990-2002)**

	1990	1993	1996	1999	2002
Constant	.949*** (.020)	.947*** (.016)	.981*** (.011)	.963*** (.008)	.978*** (.010)
Women	.013 (.004)	-.021 (.003)	-.014 (.002)	-.037* (.002)	.024 (.002)
Low Income	-.075** (.020)	-.068** (.019)	-.066** (.011)	-.042** (.008)	-.031 (.010)
18 to 25 years old	-.105** (.027)	-.095** (.027)	-.052* (.017)	-.101*** (.014)	-.072*** (.018)
26 to 35 years old	-.094** (.023)	-.127*** (.020)	-.095** (.013)	-.125*** (.010)	-.123*** (.012)
36 to 45 years old	-.014 (.023)	.001 (.019)	-.025 (.012)	-.027 (.009)	-.043* (.011)
56 to 65 years old	.013 (.026)	.034 (.022)	.022 (.015)	.025 (.011)	.015 (.012)
66 years and over	.028 (.026)	.020 (.021)	.015 (.016)	.026 (.011)	.014 (.013)
R-square	.018	.025	.010	.027	.018

Standardized Coefficients, OLS Regression

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

Source: 1990, 1993, 1996, 1999 and 2002 New Zealand Election Studies

**Table 6: The Effect of Gender, Income and Age on Vote, Sweden (1991-2002)**

	1991	1994	1998	2002
Constant	.927*** (.018)	.921*** (.020)	.886*** (.023)	.903*** (.022)
Women	-.034 (.003)	-.043 (.004)	-.021 (.004)	-.045 (.004)
Low Income	.002 (.026)	-.057 (.026)	-.32 (.033)	-.089** (.025)
18 to 21 years old	-.120*** (.032)	.031 (.039)	-.032 (.049)	-.077** (.035)
22 to 30 years old	-.044 (.021)	-.057 (.023)	-.092** (.030)	-.025 (.028)
31 to 40 years old	-.032 (.022)	-.041 (.023)	-.010 (.027)	-.090** (.025)
51 to 60 years old	.021 (.023)	-.001 (.024)	.009 (.028)	.020 (.026)
61 years and over	.020 (.025)	-.017 (.023)	.037 (.027)	-.014 (.025)
R-square	.013	.003	.012	.017

Standardized Coefficients, OLS Regression

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

Source: 1991, 1994, 1998, and 2002 Swedish Election Studies

**Table 7: The Effect of Gender, Income and Age on Vote, United Kingdom (1997-2005)**

	1997	2001	2005
Constant	.832 <sup>***</sup> (.021)	.838 <sup>***</sup> (.067)	.798 <sup>***</sup> (.014)
Women	-.029 (.004)	.013 (.011)	-.012 (.004)
Low Income	-.135 <sup>***</sup> (.018)	-.136 <sup>**</sup> (.049)	-.156 <sup>***</sup> (.023)
18 to 25 years old	-.158 <sup>***</sup> (.030)	-.118 <sup>*</sup> (.096)	-.144 <sup>***</sup> (.046)
26 to 35 years old	-.128 <sup>***</sup> (.024)	-.242 <sup>***</sup> (.073)	-.104 <sup>***</sup> (.031)
36 to 45 years old	-.052 <sup>*</sup> (.024)	-.199 <sup>**</sup> (.073)	-.025 (.027)
56 to 65 years old	.064 <sup>**</sup> (.026)	-.100 (.082)	.086 <sup>**</sup> (.029)
66 years and over	.065 <sup>**</sup> (.018)	.097 (.078)	.143 <sup>***</sup> (.027)
R-square	.061	.076	.074

Standardized Coefficients, OLS Regression

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

Source: 1997, 2001, and 2005 British Election Studies

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