

Electoral Systems, Integrated Institutions and Turnout in Local and National Elections: Canada in Comparative Perspective

HENRY MILNER *Queen's University*

Introduction

Canada's cultural proximity to the United States tends to skew informed discussion in Canada. A good example is the issue of voting turnout. Levels of political participation are in fact relatively low in Canada. But this has generated little interest, at least in part, because American participation rates, the standard against which Canadian performance is normally set, are that much lower. Turnout percentage in federal elections is typically in the low 70s, putting Canada above only the US, Switzerland and, depending on the measure used, Japan, among industrial democracies.¹

Among the industrial democracies ahead of Canada in voting turnout, as expected, are the four that use compulsory voting: Australia, Belgium, Italy and Greece. Also ahead are the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Spain, Portugal and Israel, countries classified by Lijphart as parliamentary-proportional representation (PR)—a system that, as we shall see, has been identified as foster-

- 1 Jerome H. Black, "Reforming the Context of the Voting Process in Canada: Lessons from Other Democracies," in Herman Bakvis, ed., *Voter Turnout in Canada*, Research Study of the Canadian Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991). See also Robert W. Jackman and R. A. Miller, "Voter Turnout in Industrial Democracies during the 1980s," *Comparative Political Studies* 27 (1995), 467-92. Note that if we calculate turnout as a percentage of age eligible rather than enrolled, as is done in the US but seldom elsewhere, Canadian turnout comes closer to American levels. According to figures provided by the Washington, D.C.-based International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), more than 10 per cent of potential Canadian voters are not registered.

Henry Milner, School of Policy Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario K7L 3N6. E-mail: henry.milner@grig.ulaval.ca

Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique, XXX:1 (March/mars 1997). © 1997 Canadian Political Science Association (l'Association canadienne de science politique) and/et la Société québécoise de science politique.

ing higher levels of political participation. But also included are countries with nonproportional electoral systems—the United Kingdom, France and (until recently) New Zealand. It appears, therefore, that there are other factors beside Canada's first-past-the-post (FPP) electoral system that explain the low turnout.

In this article, it is argued that low turnout in Canada is indeed related to its electoral system being nonproportional (majoritarian), but that a complementary factor is to be found in the discontinuity of its political institutions. While the relationship between PR and high turnout has been established (in the literature), there is still a puzzle surrounding the explanation for it, especially when one attempts to apply rational choice analysis to voting behaviour. I contend that a key to the solution to this puzzle lies in the effect of PR on reducing the cost of political information; and that this effect is related to PR's generally being embedded in integrated or nondiscontinuous political institutional arrangements. The most salient manifestation of this compound effect is to be found in turnout in municipal elections, where Canada's comparative rate appears even lower.

The Theoretical Framework

The two dimensions of political institutions relevant to our explanation of comparative turnout rates are set out in Figure 1, a simple 2×2 matrix. While the classification on the vertical axis, PR versus majoritarian electoral systems, is well known, that on the horizontal axis, the level of integration of political institutions, is less evident, and will be described below. A shorthand for that classification is whether or not the same political organizations are active municipally, regionally and nationally. Canada is a prime example of Type 4, that is, a majoritarian/discontinuous system (MD) featuring FPP elections and discontinuity between local, regional and national political organization and administration. The Scandinavian countries are exemplary of the opposite system, Type 1, characterized by a proportional/integrated (PI) system of institutional arrangements composed of parliaments and other representative bodies elected proportionally from multimember districts, and integrated relationships between local and national levels of politics and administration.

FIGURE 1

SYSTEMS OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

	Integrated	Discontinuous
Proportional	Type 1 (PI)	Type 2 (PD)
Majoritarian	Type 3 (MI)	Type 4 (MD)

Abstract. In this article, it is argued that Canada's relatively low rate of political participation is related to its electoral system being nonproportional, but that a complementary factor is to be found in its political institutions being discontinuous. Discontinuous institutions are manifested in relatively weak links between political organizations active municipally, regionally (provincially) and nationally. While the relationship between proportional representation (PR) and high turnout has been well established in the literature, there is still a puzzle surrounding the theoretical explanation for it. The author argues that the key to the solution to this puzzle lies less in the additional potential benefits to the voter in a PR system than in the reduction of costs, specifically information costs under such a system. PR is seen to frame incentives and disincentives for political actors in such a manner as to result in a reduction of the cost of political information. This is especially the case when PR is embedded in integrated (non-discontinuous) political institutional arrangements. The most salient manifestation of this effect is seen in comparative turnout levels in municipal elections.

Résumé. Cet article porte sur le phénomène du faible taux de participation électorale au Canada qui est en partie attribuable au mode de scrutin non proportionnel. Mais un autre facteur complémentaire doit être considéré à savoir la présence d'institutions politiques fractionnées et morcellées. Ce phénomène de morcellement se traduit entre autres par le manque d'intégration entre les structures politiques municipales, régionales (provinciales) et nationales. Bien que la relation entre un mode de scrutin proportionnel et son impact sur une participation électorale élevée ait été maintes fois démontré dans les recherches, il demeure que nous n'avons pas encore identifié de façon satisfaisante les raisons et les causes d'un tel phénomène. Cet article pose comme hypothèse que la réponse à ce phénomène ne réside pas seulement dans les bénéfices potentiellement additionnels que procure à l'électeur un système proportionnel mais aussi dans la réduction des coûts liés à l'information politique. Un mode de scrutin proportionnel crée des incitations pour les acteurs politiques de telle façon que cela a pour conséquence de réduire les coûts de l'information politique. C'est particulièrement le cas lorsqu'un mode de scrutin proportionnel s'accompagne de structures politiques institutionnelles intégrées qui permettent et facilitent la médiation politique. La manifestation la plus évidente de ces effets se fait sentir tout particulièrement au niveau du taux de participation aux élections municipales.

In reality, there is a relationship between the represented variables in the two dimensions: the proportionality of a country's electoral system and the degree of vertical integration or continuity in its political institutions, especially its party structures. Type 3, proportional/discontinuous systems, is an empty category; even (quasi-)federal systems like Germany and Austria with PR electoral systems cannot be characterized as discontinuous. As a rule, PR is embedded in a system of vertically integrated political relationships. The reverse is not quite as true: Britain, which is considered separately below, has a nonproportional electoral system, yet its political institutions are relatively integrated, so that it is best classified as Type 2. On the whole, Britain notwithstanding, the main dichotomy—and, perhaps, choice—lies between Type 1 and Type 4.

How does the distinction in Figure 1 relate to voting turnout? It is postulated that the cost of information is an important factor in the individual's choice of whether to vote, and that this cost is in turn linked to the costs and benefits of politicians sharing and disseminating information. More concretely, under PI (Type 1) institutional arrangements, because political agents have greater incentives (benefits) and fewer institutional obstacles (costs) to supplying political information, infor-

mation passes at lower cost both horizontally and vertically than under the MD system. It is hypothesized that there is a correlation between the low information cost of PI compared to MD systems and the high turnout in the countries using PR.

In thus expressing the hypothesis in cost-benefit terms, we join the discussion over the advantages and disadvantages of applying rational choice theory to the study of political institutions, specifically those affecting voting behaviour. Can political participation be explained in a manner consistent with rational choice analysis, or does what we know about political participation in fact cast doubt on the enterprise of using rational choice explanations in political science? While the latter question is frequently posed, debate over it does not usually centre around information costs and their reduction, as it does here. But if it is indeed less costly for voters under PI to be informed about political choices, as argued below, then higher voting under a PI than under a MD system can be consistent with a rational choice explanation.

Such an approach can help explain the well-documented fact that the better educated vote regularly,² which appears to be at odds with a rational choice explanation. Critics of rational choice such as Green and Shapiro³ have developed this argument on the benefit side of the equation, building on the fact that the likely effect of any one vote actually determining an election outcome is minuscule. They conclude that rational choice analysis cannot help explain the decision to vote, and, especially, why voting is generally positively associated with level of education, since, if anything, the better-educated individuals are more likely to understand how insignificant the effect—and thus the benefit—of their vote. To make their case, Green and Shapiro reduce rational choice analysis to instrumentalism: any possible benefits to the voter unrelated to determining the outcome is rejected as incompatible with rational choice. But only the most narrow of rational choice scholars dispute the point that for people with a sense of civic duty, voting provides additional benefits (attached to the act of voting), benefits separate from those derived from the possibility of affecting the outcome.

Yet such benefits do not derive, as a rule, from flipping a coin and casting an X: the act of voting itself entails making an appropriate, that is, informed, choice. This means that “civic-duty” benefits—as well, of course, as any instrumental benefits from potentially affecting the

- 2 Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); and R. A. Texiera, *The Disappearing American Voter* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1992).
- 3 Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 69.

outcome—have costs reflecting the difficulty of acquiring information about alternate choices. Once the act of voting is linked to one's being informed, cost factors enter the explanation of differentials in voting turnout—but the costs are different from the opportunity costs usually considered in the rational choice literature. The opportunity costs of voting have become extremely marginal in democratic countries; the amount of time and effort expended in voting is comparable, say, to going out to visit a neighbourhood craft exhibition. And class-based obstacles such as not obtaining time off to get to the polls are rare in stable democracies.

But the picture changes significantly when we take information costs into account along with opportunity costs. The effect of information costs on voting turnout is both trivial and complex. There is a wealth of data showing that the more informed the voters, the more likely they are to vote. As one student of the subject put it recently: "There is near universal agreement [that] more knowledgeable people participate at a much higher rate."⁴ A Canadian study found that being informed about politics was a much better predictor of likelihood to vote than any aspect of the individual's social background.⁵ The more complex question concerns the relationship between the overall availability of information and the propensity to vote. In Downs's terms, individuals are "rationally ignorant," resulting from their unwillingness to pay for acquiring costly information, though, where possible, they will avail themselves of "free" and "subsidized" information.⁶ Sanders,⁷ who, like others, finds the better-educated and better-paid individuals in her sample vote more often, sees this as a confirmation of Downs's assertion that they have lower information costs than lower-class individuals, who can less easily bear the costs of information. But Downs considers such free and subsidized information from the point of view of the individual choosing to acquire it, and not, as is of concern here, with the institutional arrangements for disseminating information.

The relationship between institutionalized information dissemination and turnout can only be detected indirectly. One way is to study why US congressional elections known to be close contests generate

- 4 Jane Junn, "Participation in Liberal Democracy: What Citizens Learn from Political Activity," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1995, 9. See also Jon H. Pammett, "Voting Turnout in Canada," in Herman Bakvis, ed., *Voter Turnout in Canada*.
- 5 Cited in K. Archer, R. Gibbins, R. Knopff and L. Pal, *Parameters of Power: Canada's Political Institutions* (Toronto: Nelson, 1995), 387.
- 6 Anthony J. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1957), 229.
- 7 Elizabeth Sanders, "On the Costs, Utilities, and Simple Joys of Voting," *Journal of Politics* 42 (1980), 854-63.

higher turnout.⁸ Looking at this evidence, Aldrich asks why it should make any difference. It cannot be simply that the voter perceives an increased chance of affecting the outcome, he contends, since, in reality, the voter's likelihood of affecting the outcome remains minuscule. There must be an indirect effect: that parties invest more effort and money the more the outcome is in doubt, thus providing the voter with more freely available information.⁹ A recent Canadian study by Eagles found a similar, though weak, association between both the closeness of elections and the amount spent by parties at the constituency level with turnout in the 1980 and 1984 Canadian elections, but none in 1988. Eagles speculates that the effects of the local campaigns in 1988 "might have been nullified by the combined effects of the multimillion dollar campaigns of the national parties and the estimated \$10 million advertising campaign mounted by proponents and opponents of free trade in that election."¹⁰

If, as seems clear, more people in the same jurisdiction turn out to vote in more highly publicized elections, is it not reasonable to think that political institutions in different countries affect the information people have about the content and stakes of alternative political choices? This can be expressed by a general hypothesis attributing higher levels of participation under PI political institutions to lower political information costs. Without compulsory voting, typically, somewhere between 65 and 85 per cent of the electorate turns out to vote in national elections in parliamentary democracies. This up-to-20 per cent difference may be taken as a first approximation of the potential differential effect of information-disseminating institutions. There is a growing body of research following on the work of Rosenstone and Wolfinger,¹¹ who concluded that differences in individual resources, on which voting studies have traditionally centred,¹² had to be supplemented by analyses of the conduciveness of the institutional setting to individuals making use of those resources through political participation.

Proportional electoral systems are part of such an institutional setting, with conduciveness understood here as reflecting the connection between information and action. This conceptualization allows us to go beyond the standard rational choice explanations of additional benefits

8 John Filer, Lawrence Kenny and Rebecca Morton, "Redistribution, Income, and Voting," *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (1993), 63-87.

9 John Aldrich, "Rational Choice and Turnout," *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (1993), 246-78.

10 Monroe Eagles, "Voting and Non-voting in Canadian Federal Elections: An Ecological Analysis," in Bakvis, ed., *Voter Turnout in Canada*.

11 Wolfinger and Rosenstone, *Who Votes?*

12 Typical is S. Verba and N. Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

due to fewer votes being “wasted” under PR for the positive empirical relationship between PR and high turnout.¹³ An additional significant explanatory variable is to be found in the cost: PR, and especially PR embedded in integrated institutions (PI), constitutes a framework for policy choices that tends to result in a more informed electorate. This link between individual choices of whether to vote, institutions and information is drawn in an article by Mark Franklin and his collaborators, who analyze turnout variations in elections to the European parliament. Among their conclusions is the following: “turnout seems above all to be affected by voters’ awareness of the consequences of their decisions. Proportionality enhances the predictable consequences of the voters’ choice.”¹⁴

This explanation helps to answer a puzzle noted by Blais and Carty who, despite showing that countries using PR systems average significantly higher levels of turnout than FPP ones, found no correlation between the actual degree of disproportionality and turnout. In trying to resolve the puzzle, Blais and Carty speculate that it is not the degree of proportionality that promotes turnout but the “symbolic” effects of electoral systems, “the mere fact that voters have an electoral procedure that assures some proportionality.”¹⁵ To turn this “symbolic” aspect into a real aspect of the institutional setting, we begin with the fact that PR electoral systems are generally embedded in wider (PI) systems of institutional arrangements, and that this degree of embeddedness is not necessarily reflected by the degree to which electoral outcomes approximate pure proportionality.

To explore the connection we first try to isolate the specific effects of proportionality in electoral institutions on political information, and thus on turnout, and then factor in the additional effects of integratedness. The dependent variable is turnout, not level of political information. Of course, if this argument is correct, we should expect a higher level of political knowledge in proportional than in nonproportional systems—other things, such as education and economic development levels, being equal. But little suitable empirical data are available for this. It is, however, notoriously difficult to create tests of political knowledge across nations. Though there is increased interest in assessing and comparing the level of political information in the electorate,¹⁶

13 See Black, “Reforming the Context.”

14 M. Franklin, C. Van der Eijk and E. Oppenheim, “The Motivational Basis of Electoral Participation: European Elections Provide a Crucial Test,” paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research, Joint Sessions, Bordeaux, 1995.

15 André Blais and R. K. Carty, “Does Proportional Representation Foster Voter Turnout?” *European Journal of Political Research* 18 (1990), 179.

16 See Michael Delli Carpini, “Measuring Political Knowledge: Putting First Things First,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 55 (1993), 583-612.

researchers are reluctant to claim cross-cultural validity for questionnaire data on political information.¹⁷ One rare study that suggests we might be on the right track asked a representative sample of people in the US, Canada, Britain, France and Germany questions on five aspects of international politics. Germany, the only PR country, placed first, with France, which has used a mix of electoral systems at national and local levels, a distant second.¹⁸

Proportional Representation and Information Cost Reduction

In the parliamentary system in which the executive depends on the “confidence” of the majority in the legislature to remain in office, stable government entails disciplined political parties. Voters can hold legislators accountable through party affiliation, on which they typically base their vote in general elections. It comes as no surprise that in the substantial majority of parliamentary democracies where members of parliaments are elected under PR, the proportion of seats accorded to the parties generally accurately reflects voters’ sentiments.¹⁹ In addition, in a regionally disparate and divided country, PR ensures that each party is represented fairly over the entire country, not over-represented in regions where it is strong and underrepresented where it is weak.

- 17 For example, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) group (see S. J. Rosenstone, “Electoral Institutions and Democratic Choice,” paper presented at the Workshops of the European Consortium on Political Research, Bordeaux, April 1995) had as one objective to compare knowledge about politics in its samples of the population in 50 countries by asking the same or parallel questions in each. In response to my query on whether the ongoing pilot studies would be seeking out that information, the coordinator, Steven Rosenstone, replied: “The political information items were not asked on the pilot studies. The planning committee thought that those items should be moved to the ‘background’ section, meaning that each nation will ask an appropriate set of political information items so as to produce a 5-point political information scale within their polity. *It is a hopeless task to come up with items that will work in a comparable fashion across polities.* Instead, the hope is to have a scale in each polity that divides the population into quintiles of information” (emphasis added).
- 18 Because of the almost inevitable bias in any such questionnaire, national differences must be treated with great caution. In this case, a perfect score of 5 out of 5 meant the respondent knew who Boris Yeltsin, Boutros-Boutros Ghali, the Serbs, the PLO and North Korea were. The Germans’ performance was so far superior that questionnaire content cannot be the only explanatory factor at play. Fifty-nine per cent of the Germans, compared with almost 25 per cent of the French, answered 4 or 5 correctly. At the bottom was the US with 16 (S. E. Bennett et al., “The Impact of Personal Characteristics and Mass Media Exposure on Citizens’ Knowledge of Foreign Affairs: A Five-Nation Study,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1995).
- 19 Douglas Rae, *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

Experience shows that where there are adequate safeguards in the form of thresholds against the proliferation of small, one-issue or narrowly based, parties, PR generally results in workable governing coalitions. We know that beyond promoting higher turnout, PR systems also foster greater political participation on the part of members of under-represented groups, especially women.²⁰ Moreover, students of the effects of electoral systems are finding that, over time, experience of stable coalition government tends to promote political cooperation and consensus.²¹ To these not insignificant effects of PR, we add another: by assuring them that the number of seats the parties are accorded reflects their popular support, PR frames incentives and disincentives for politicians in such a manner as to result in a reduction of the cost of political information, especially when PR is embedded in integrated political institutions.

The political market not being a perfect market,²² adequate information must be supplied through the political institutions themselves. The information effect of electing legislators through PR is here termed "horizontal" political information-cost reduction. There is both a simple and a complex aspect to this horizontal effect. The straightforward aspect concerns political actors at the same level: with disparities in the support of the parties not exacerbated by the electoral system (as in FPP), political parties have to cooperate to govern, and thus minimize impediments to the transmission of information crucial to efficient cooperation.

A more complex form of horizontal political information cost reduction takes place between active politicians and the electorate. PR reduces the cost to political leaders of making the electorate more aware of the alternative positions on the salient policies, and of how they, as opposed to their opponents, view their likely effect if implemented. We can see this first in the choices confronting FPP-based political actors in the legislature. Legislators (and their political ad-

20 D. T. Studlar and R. E. Matland, "The Growth of Women's Representation in the Canadian House of Commons: A Reappraisal," this JOURNAL 27 (1994), 53-80; and R. E. Matland, "How the Election System Structure Has Helped Women Close the Representation Gap," in L. Karvonen and P. Selle, eds., *Women in Nordic Politics* (Aldershot, UK: Dartmouth, 1995).

21 There is a wide literature linking political institutions, including the type of electoral system, with political consensus and economic performance. See, for example, Arend Lijphart, "Democracies: Forms, Performances, and Constitutional Engineering," *European Journal of Political Research* 25 (1995), 1-18; Richard Jankowski, "Responsible, Irresponsible and Westminster Parties: A Theoretical and Empirical Evaluation," *British Journal of Political Science*, 23 (1993), 107-29; and Paul J. Quirk, "The Cooperative Resolution of Policy Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 83 (1989), 905-21.

22 See Réjean Landry, "The Imperfect Political Market for a Constitutional Deal," *Inroads* 1 (Summer 1992), 40-54.

visers, parliamentary journalists, and so on) form a picture of the political world outside the legislature influenced by what they experience within it. The single-party government typically produced under FPP distorts the nature of the mandate, which almost always comes not from a real majority of the population but rather from an artificial majority created by the electoral system. The governing party is expected to implement its programme as if a majority of the population were behind it, rather than seek broad-based multipartisan support for needed, but controversial, reforms. It knows, moreover, that such support is not forthcoming, since other parties, with no chance of participating in the government between elections, have nothing to gain by cooperating. Their political interest lies in denouncing unpopular policies, even ones they know to be necessary, in the strongest terms. Both of these tendencies are exacerbated under FPP in comparison to PR, since a party seeking power under the former knows that the choices of a relatively small number of voters can make the difference between constituting a majority government and opposing one. There is a potentially great payoff for perfecting overblown rhetoric and oversimplification. With politics as a zero-sum game, distorting the opponent's position and keeping one's own policy content vague pays off. But the result is a misinformed, if not misled, public.²³ In contrast, under PR, with majority government effectively unrealizable, collaboration among parties is unavoidable and becomes the norm.²⁴ Where compromise and coalition is a visible, built-in feature of the political process, opponents can collaborate even when they disagree. One overall result of this pattern is greater continuity and thus stability in state policy,²⁵

- 23 Douglas J. Amy, *Real Choices/New Voices* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Blais and Gidengil found 80 per cent of Canadians surveyed agreed that most candidates make promises they have no intention of keeping, and that those elected to parliament soon lose touch with the people (André Blais and Elizabeth Gidengil, *Making Representative Democracy Work*, Research Study of the Canadian Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing [Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991]).
- 24 Typical is the following: "in our interviews with representatives of the parliamentary parties, we found that they agreed that the pension question was such a large issue affecting the long term future of Swedish citizens that . . . compromise which transcended the political blocs was essential" (Evelyn Huber and J. D. Stephens, "The Swedish Welfare State at the Crossroads," in *Current Sweden*, no. 394 [New York: Swedish Information Service, 1993], 3). I am not suggesting that the transformation toward collaboration among parties and classes takes place overnight; a change in political culture is necessarily a slow process. The argument is rather that, as demonstrated by societies highly polarized by class such as Finland, over time, such cooperation will become accepted and, indeed, expected.
- 25 Rogowski summarizes the arguments of British industrialists who favour electoral reform as fostering a business climate favourable to long-term investment. He goes on to argue that there is a relationship between reliance on international

rather than the cyclical pattern under FPP where opposition parties seek—and are expected to carry out—mandates²⁶ for visible change from volatile electorates.

There is also a parallel logic operating at the level of the electoral district. The crucial element is the existence of single-member constituencies under FPP. It is well known that such constituencies provide incentives for catering to narrow local interests.²⁷ But the effect is very subtle. Irvine's classic analysis of the effects of Canada's electoral system depicted FPP as overvaluing the behaviour of the least partisan citizens, those who can make the difference between winning and losing marginal seats—since that is what counts for winning power—at the expense of traditional party supporters, eroding the usefulness of the party to the electorate. In the long run more and more voters become volatile, that is, they loosen their ties to the political party which purports to be “everybody's instrument.” Such a party is, in fact “nobody's instrument.”²⁸

The resulting quite rapid turnover among legislators in a single-member system makes it difficult for individuals to envisage a political career through continuous service to the party and the electorate.²⁹

trade and PR since states that can provide the required continuity and stability of policy are better able to engage effectively in international trade. One measure of the comparative instability and stability is the extent to which governing parties (irresponsibly) use their macroeconomic powers to strengthen their position with voters at the end of their mandates (see Ronald Rogowski, “Trade and the Variety of Democratic Institutions.” *International Organization* 41 [1987], 203-04). The presence of this “political business cycle” is found less in countries using PR (see E. Tufte, *Political Control of the Economy* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978]).

- 26 In fact, the mandate is no more solid under FPP than it is under PR. Despite expectations to the contrary, the “manifesto group” found, in its detailed study of party programmes and government policies in 10 Western countries, that PR-based parties are at least as good at turning their programmatic commitments into government policy as those in FPP-based systems (see Richard I. Hofferberg “Parties, Policies, and Democracy: An Overview,” in H. D. Klingemann, R. I. Hofferberg and I. Budge, eds., *Parties, Policies, and Democracy* [Boulder: Westview, 1994]). It turns out that the “clear mandate” under FPP is not really clear; the outcome under FPP is clear only in being numerically decisive at the cost of distorting the voters' wishes.
- 27 For example, Bakvis cites a German study which found the legislators elected from single-member districts to be far more disposed towards obtaining and locating specific government projects than those elected from the list (Herman Bakvis, “Regional Boondoggles and Electoral Reform,” *Policy Options* 14 [1993], 29-31).
- 28 William Irvine, *Does Canada Need a New Electoral System?* (Kingston: Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, Queen's University, 1979), 77.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 30. Irvine cites figures showing only 10 per cent of defeated Canadian party candidates standing in the subsequent elections.

Lacking the local party activists to serve as representatives, antennae and organization builders between elections, the party turns to “experts” and pollsters to tell it how to appeal to the voters, thus further alienating traditional supporters. Carty found that in the latter 1980s, local organizations of Canada’s national mass party, the New Democratic party, averaged six times more members in districts where they had incumbents.³⁰ Yet, even the party whose candidate was successful in the FPP district is not spared. The party relies on that MP as its link with its supporters at the base; but that MP needs the party organization only to assure renomination. In between, what counts is the sympathy of local voters not aligned with the party. Thus the normal, everyday activities of the local MP contradict the basic message and undermine the continuity of the party. Just as the signals the governing party under FPP receives from its parliamentary environment mislead it into thinking that it has the mandate of the majority of the population, so the members elected by plurality in a single-member district see a world in which they reflect the whole political spectrum.

In contrast, under PR, parties have reason to build faithful voting blocs around individuals who are advancing their political careers. Legislators elected along with candidates of other parties on a proportional basis in a multimember regional district are not prone to lose sight of the fact that it is party that links them to the electorate, just as a governing party elected under PR does not lose sight of the fact that majority support is not supplied by elections, but must be built anew for each important legislative initiative. The voters under PR, as opposed to FPP, are more likely to be provided with a reliable (less costly) guide about the relationship between their votes and policy outcomes.

Vertical Political Integration and Informed Participation

As already noted, there is a relationship between a country’s electoral system and the degree of vertical continuity in its political institutions, especially its party structures. PR is typically embedded in a system of integrated or nondiscontinuous political relationships, forming the PI system of political institutional arrangements. The logic for this relationship is quite simple: under PR, there is far more likelihood of a given party electing a comparable proportion of representatives to a municipal council and to the regional and national assemblies from that locality. In contrast, the exaggerated volatility of the vote under FPP renders precarious the survival of local political parties, including those affiliated with national parties.

30 See R. K. Carty, *Political Parties in the Constituencies*, Research Study of the Canadian Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991).

Canada approximates an “ideal-type” MD system, that is, one where political and administrative discontinuity is the rule. This becomes apparent if we consider the situation facing political participation on the most local of concerns (say, the use of the local school facilities), right up to the actions of national legislators. Elections for school boards (in Quebec³¹) take place apart from municipal elections (which are themselves not all held simultaneously). Provincial elections take place apart from federal elections and their respective single-member electoral district boundaries do not correspond. Municipal-level parties are relatively rare and short-lived: where they exist, they tend to serve primarily as a lightning rod for the venting of discontent. The administrative districts of provincial and federal ministries concerned with the same portfolios do not correspond with each other, nor do they, as a rule, correspond with the boundaries of municipalities, or those of school boards and other boards or administrative agencies. Even if we limit ourselves to the provincial and federal parties in Canada, local party organizations are more likely to be exclusively involved in activities in one arena than to be involved even marginally with political activities in the other.³²

The opposite is true of Scandinavian political institutions which approximate the ideal-PI set of institutional arrangements in which local, regional and national party, legislative and administrative structures, from the national parliament down to specialized local and regional commissions, are integrated. Proportional representation by party is key: at all levels, seats are distributed proportionally among the political parties; in the chambers it is through elections from party lists and in the commissions it is through appointment by designated party bodies.

The same parties (through the same organizational structures) contest elections at each level. The frontiers of the territories of the regional assemblies and municipalities into which they are subdivided (and thus of the school commissions, public health boards and the like which are committees of the municipal or regional councils) correspond to those of the administrative districts of the state. The key political units of the entire system are the municipal organizations of the (national) parties, which receive the bulk of the public subsidies going to political parties.³³ They are the key elements of a vertical political

31 Each province sets its own rules on this matter and Quebec is used as an example here. Not only is there provincial variation in the link between school board and municipal elections, but also between political parties at the federal and provincial levels, with Quebec's institutions among the most discontinuous.

32 Carty finds that only 40 per cent of local organizations of federal parties are in any way concerned with provincial politics (*Political Parties*, 47).

33 Agne Gustavsson, *Local Government in Sweden* (Stockholm: Swedish Institute, 1988).

network linking upwards through party activities oriented toward national politics, such as programme elaboration and nomination of candidates, and downwards to appointments to, and inputs into, school boards and other commissions, boards and agencies. The everyday activities of the candidates and incumbents at the various levels complement each other and consolidate the message and continuity of the party.

In this context, information passes vertically as a matter of course. Decisions to be taken, say, in local school commissions can be expected to be reasonably well informed by knowledge of wider policy discussions at the national government level, and vice versa. Since, moreover, these activities are public in nature and reported in the media,³⁴ even passive participants can comparatively easily find where to address their concerns—and thus their votes. Operating within such a low information-cost environment, voters have access to a relatively clear and comprehensive political map to consult in choosing their political course of action.

Comparing Local Political Participation

As we have seen, under PI institutional arrangements political agents have greater incentives (benefits) and fewer institutional obstacles (costs) to supplying political information: information thus passes at lower cost both horizontally and vertically than under the MD system. We can therefore reasonably expect higher levels of political participation under PI. Since PR electoral systems constitute a fundamental component of PI systems, the already-cited literature linking PR to higher voting turnout serves as a first confirmation of this hypothesis. But it does not enable us to identify the specific effect of integrated political institutions on turnout.

There is at least one aspect of the integratedness of political institutions that has been considered in the literature, that of bicameralism. Jackman's figures, based on Lijphart's classification, show a clear correlation between unicameralism and weak bicameralism with turnout. The standard explanation, however, is based on benefits, not costs. Jackman³⁵ hypothesizes that the more powerful the upper house, the

34 Election campaigns under the Scandinavian PI system are far more party-platform oriented, and far less candidate-personality oriented than in North America. See Karen Siune, "The Political Role of the Mass Media in Scandinavia," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 12 (1987), 395-414. This, of course, raises a related factor that cannot be elaborated upon here, that is, the distinct role of the mass media in the Nordic countries. See Henry Milner, *Social Democracy and Rational Choice: The Scandinavian Experience and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 1994).

35 Robert W. Jackman, "Political Institutions and Voter Turnout in Industrial Democracies," *American Political Science Review* 81 (1987), 405-23.

less decisive the vote for the lower house; the less decisive the vote, the lower the turnout. Our formulation would add that the less important the second chamber, the more a system is integrated; the more a system is integrated, the lower the information costs.

Overall, however, the existing literature cannot adequately serve the purpose of assessing the effect of the degree of integration on political participation because it is confined almost exclusively to national turnout. The relative absence of comparative aggregate data on turnout in local elections is unfortunate (and surprising) since such turnout is surely a highly salient measure of popular participation, and thus of the viability and vitality of democratic institutions. For our purposes, such data would be most helpful in capturing the effect of the degree of integration of political institutions.

If, as is hypothesized, the differential effects of PI and MD systems of political institutions will be reflected especially strongly in local political participation, comparing average turnout in municipal elections should provide the fullest quantitative reflection of this qualitative distinction. (A useful measure of the effects of PR alone upon turnout would be to compare turnout in two municipalities using different electoral systems in the same country. This is the tack suggested in the pioneering work of Rokkan,³⁶ in which he compares municipal turnout figures from Norway early in this century when both PR and majoritarian systems were used in local elections finding greater turnout under the former.)³⁷ The argument, simply stated, goes as follows: differences in national turnout between PI and MD systems reflect essentially the effect of the different electoral systems. Differences in municipal turnout between the two systems reflect both the difference in electoral systems (national, regional and municipal) and in the degree of integration of political institutions. The difference between national and municipal turnout would thus reflect, essentially, the level of integration of the system: a PI system could be expected not only to have higher turnout at both levels, but to have a smaller *difference* between the two levels than an MD one.

Based on the argument so far, it comes as no surprise that aggregate turnout data in municipal elections are especially difficult to come

36 Stein Rokkan et al., *Citizens, Elections, Parties* (New York: David McKay, 1970), 190-203.

37 Andreas Ladner of the University of Bern has studied turnout for municipalities in the canton of Bern, comparing those using PR and those using majoritarian methods of electing civic executives. He finds a significant positive correlation of turnout, but only for communes under 5,000 in population (Andreas Ladner, "Majorz oder Proporz—Die Auswirkungen des Wahlverfahrens auf die politische Partizipation und das politische Interesse," *Berner Tatung: Die politischen Systeme Deutschlands, Osterreichs und der Schweiz im Vergleich 1* [January 19-21, 1996]).

by for the countries with discontinuous systems. This is indeed a reflection of the higher political information costs under MD. The only published comparative study of local political participation, that of Morland,³⁸ found systematic municipal turnout data only for the US (and only for cities over 25,000 in population) among Western MD countries. If we compare his 1970s figures for the US with those of the PI democracies on which he supplies data, excluding Sweden (where local elections are simultaneous with national elections) and those countries where voting is compulsory, the result is as follows. There is a 28 per cent difference between local (31%) and national (59%) turnout levels in the US; that difference goes from 15 per cent (Ireland, with its semi-proportional STV electoral system) down to 4 per cent (Finland) in the six PI states. Finland makes a very good case for comparison with the US because it also separately elects its president who has real powers. Turnout for Finnish parliamentary elections in the 1980s and 1990s averaged 76 per cent (which is low by Scandinavian standards and probably related to the separate election of the president); turnout for municipal elections during the same period averaged 71 per cent.³⁹

There appears to be no aggregate municipal turnout data for Canada on a provincial, let alone federal, basis. Indeed, apparently only in Quebec do provincial authorities assemble local election data. Data in other provinces must be collected municipality by municipality. Examining turnout data for all Quebec municipalities which had municipal elections in the years 1993 and 1994, excluding those under 20,000 in population, an average of roughly 54 per cent of eligible voters cast ballots for their mayor and/or city councillor.⁴⁰ (These figures apply to where there were contested mayoral contests; for example, in 1994, 78 of 196 open mayoral posts were filled by acclamation.) In Montreal, by far the largest city, turnout in the last three elections averaged 45 per cent. Montreal is often singled out for the fact that political parties there have long contested elections. But these parties, it should be noted, are not affiliated with higher-level parties, and very often—if they do not simply disintegrate—change names through mergers or splits after their first electoral contest.

Perhaps the most appropriate comparison of the Quebec “ideal type” would be Norway with its far-flung periphery. Norwegian fig-

38 Robert L. Morlan, “Municipal vs. National Election Voter Turnout: Europe and the United States,” *Political Science Quarterly* 99 (1984), 457-70.

39 I am indebted to Kimmo Kuusela of the University of Turku for these figures.

40 The figures represent 28 of the 53 municipalities with over 20,000 in population, including the five largest. There is no evident bias to the sample, apart from the fact that it excludes the 40 per cent of the population that lives in smaller municipalities. A glance at the figures of the smaller municipalities shows a somewhat higher turnout but also more frequent acclamations.

ures appear to be comparable to Finnish ones: according to Bjorklund,⁴¹ turnout in the 1979, 1983 and 1987 Norwegian municipal elections averaged around 71 per cent, the same as Finland's. This compares with the 81 per cent averages in the national figures in the elections of 1981, 1985, 1989 and 1993.⁴² In sum, while the disparity between turnout at the two levels in Norway is not negligible at roughly 10 per cent, it is less than half that of Quebec. And these figures ignore the differences in the acclamation rate, which is negligible in Norwegian local elections. There is thus good reason to interpret the difference as reflecting the discontinuity of political institutions in Quebec compared to the integration of those in Norway.

This brings up the question of Britain, where it is the national parties that, as a rule, contest local elections. How then are we to explain the large disparity in voting turnout between British local and national elections? Since Britain is an intermediate, Type 2, system (see Figure 1), its turnout in national elections at a level somewhat above Canada's would lead us to expect its turnout in local elections to average above the levels found for Quebec, rather than the roughly 40 per cent that it is.⁴³ The answer lies, I suspect, in the comparatively limited powers of local government which appear to turn local elections into little more than rehearsals for national elections, comparable to votes for the European parliament. I suspect this means that it is possible to have Type 2 majoritarian electoral systems with high levels of institutional integration, but only when those institutions are highly centralized. Such centralization, however, would then tend to cancel out the information-cost reduction effect of that integration.

Conclusion

Our interest in voting turnout is not only in and of itself, but a reflection of something more intangible—political involvement and interest. And it is at the local level closest to the citizen's everyday activities that turnout and informed political participation are most closely linked. Voting in local elections is less likely to be a merely passive act and more likely to be a reflection of more active forms of involvement than is voting at the national level. Voting in national elections can be visualized as the outer circle among concentric circles, in which, as they

41 Tor Bjorklund, "The Norwegian Local Elections: A Protest Election with a Swing to the Right," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 13 (1988), 211-34.

42 Henry Valen and Hanne M. Narud, "Government Alternatives, Cross Pressures and Electoral Turnout at the 1993 *Storting* Election," paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions, Madrid, 1994.

43 Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, "Turnout in English Local Elections—An Aggregate Analysis with Electoral and Contextual Data," *Electoral Studies* 9 (1990), 79-90.

get smaller, participation becomes more active and informed. But the relationship between these circles is not always the same. In her study of political participation and political knowledge at different levels, Junn found that while political activity at the local level correlates positively with knowledge of local leaders, it has no relationship with the amount known about national leaders.⁴⁴

In general, thus, it would appear that as we go from MD to PI systems of institutional arrangements, the circles take the form of communicating vases with significant spillover. If this is indeed so, then we can expect higher levels of political participation not only quantitatively (turning out to vote), but also qualitatively (more active rather than passive) under PI, that is, in the context of parliamentary institutions with proportional multimember elections at all levels and integrated relationships between local and national institutions of politics and administration.

Much further study is needed before this expectation can be verified and conclusions derived are robust enough to lend themselves to proposals for possible changes in institutional design for Canada and elsewhere. One thing is clear: Canadian and comparative political studies can only benefit from a greater and more comprehensive concern with how political institutions frame the information on the basis of which individuals make political choices.

44 Junn, "Participation in Liberal Democracy."