

# Selective abstention in simultaneous elections: Understanding the turnout gap

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## ABSTRACT

If two elections are held at the same day, why do some people choose to vote in one but to abstain in another? We argue that selective abstention is driven by the same factors that determine voter turnout. Our empirical analysis focuses on Sweden where the (aggregate) turnout gap between local and national elections has been about 2–3%. Rich administrative register data reveal that people from higher socio-economic backgrounds, immigrants, women, older individuals, and people who have been less geographically mobile are less likely to selectively abstain.

## 1. Introduction

Voter turnout varies greatly across time and space (Blais, 2000). This holds true even when focusing on simultaneously held elections within countries. The notion of selective abstention is commonplace. For example, Burnham (1965) makes a remark on “[...] the tendency of the electorate to vote for ‘prestige’ offices but not for the lower offices on the same ballot” in the United States. This raises a puzzle. Why do some people choose to vote in one election but to abstain in another if they have already shown up at the polling station? Who are the selectively-abstaining voters?

Answering these questions is not straightforward. Voter turnout scholars have explored the connection between various individual-level characteristics and selective abstention building on both aggregate and/or survey data (Augenblick and Nicholson, 2015; Bullock and Dunn 1996; McGregor 2018; Wattenberg et al. 2000). However, inferences from aggregate data are subject to the well-understood ecological inference problem. Survey data on voter turnout, on the other hand, tend to suffer from misreporting that may be correlated with potentially unobserved voter characteristics (Holbrook and Krosnick 2009; Robinson 1950; Silver et al. 1986). Reconciling why some voters selectively abstain in elections thus requires (validated) individual-level information on voter turnout choices.

In this paper, we employ exceptional administrative register data from Sweden where voters vote in elections at three different levels—national, regional, and municipal—at the same time. Our data combine validated voter turnout information with a plethora of individual-level characteristics. With this data set at hand, we demonstrate that individual characteristics that typically predict voter turnout (or abstention) are also associated with selective abstention. Our empirical analysis reveals that people from higher socio-economic backgrounds, immigrants, women, older individuals, and people who have been less geographically mobile are less likely to selectively abstain. Given the nature of our data, we are able to estimate these relationships while holding all institutional factors fixed.<sup>1</sup> The correlations that we find are robust to a number of modeling choices, and they are in line with various arguments that link individuals’ demographic and socio-economic characteristics with the costs and benefits of voting (Almond and Verba 1963; Brady et al. 1995; Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

In Sweden, the turnout gap between local and national elections has been about 2–3%. The difference may seem small, but the aggregate number masks substantial heterogeneity. For example, in the most recent election in 2018, the turnout difference in the national and the municipal election varied between 0.7% in the municipality of Bjurholm and as much as 11.9% in the municipality of Eda (Statistics Sweden

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<sup>1</sup> Another key advantage of our data is that we are able to follow voters over time. We find that selective abstention in the past is a strong determinant of selective abstention today. This suggests that voters who cast a vote only in some of the elections do not do so by mistake.

2020). The systematic differences in the turnout base that we document may thus have meaningful consequences for public policies (Aggeborn 2016; Fowler 2013; Fujiwara 2015; Hansford and Gomez 2010). Furthermore, elections between parties and candidates are often decided by small margins. Shifts in the distribution of political power between parties and changes in the characteristics of elected officials influence policy even after close elections (Folke 2014; Hyttinen et al., 2018; Pettersson-Lidbom 2008).

The remainder of this research note is organized as follows. The following section describes our institutional context and data in detail. We discuss theoretical considerations in the third section. In the fourth section, we present our empirical analysis and findings. The fifth section concludes the study.

## 2. Sweden as a test bed

We study selective electoral participation in the context of Sweden. Elections to the Swedish Parliament, municipal councils, and county councils have been held simultaneously since 1970.<sup>2</sup> At present, elections are held every four years on the second Sunday of September. For the past ten years, voter turnout has exceeded 80% in all types of elections (see Fig. 1), but there has been a relatively stable turnout gap between municipal and regional, and national elections. For example, in 2018, about 87% of the voters voted in the national election but the turnout rate was roughly three percentage points lower in the local elections.

The political environment is fairly homogeneous across different types of elections. They all use the same electoral system: proportional representation with semi-open lists. Each voter may cast one vote per election that they are allowed to participate in. The candidate lists for each party are printed on separate ballot papers, and there is one party list per election. The ballots for the three elections have similar layouts but a different colors.<sup>3</sup> A key difference between the elections at different levels are eligibility rules. To vote in a Swedish parliamentary

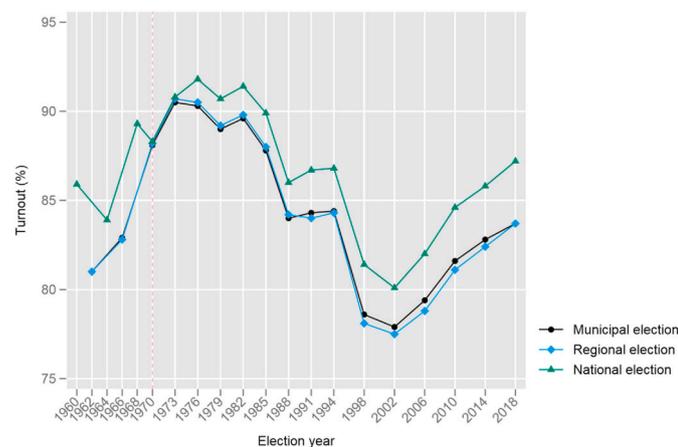


Fig. 1. Turnout in Swedish elections, 1960–2018. Elections have been organized on the same day since 1970 (dashed vertical line). Source: Statistics Sweden (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Municipal councils are responsible for policies such as urban planning and primary and secondary education. County councils organize health care. Therefore, both levels of government are responsible for providing important local public goods and services.

<sup>3</sup> In the United States, many elections are typically included on the same ballot. Selective voter abstention is often referred to as “roll-off”, as voters are more likely to abstain in races for less salient offices that are usually listed lower on the ballot (Bowler and Donovan, 2000).

election, one must be a Swedish citizen and at least 18 years old. Voting in elections for the county and municipal councils is less restricted. An individual is allowed to vote in these elections if he or she is at least 18 years old and a citizen in Sweden, Iceland, Norway, or any EU country. Furthermore, permanent residents who are citizens in other countries are eligible to vote if they have lived in Sweden for three consecutive years (see also Aggeborn et al., 2020).

In our context, differential eligibility rules are one fundamental reason why inferences from aggregate data would suffer from the ecological fallacy. This calls for individual-level data if we want to understand what is behind selective abstention. Using Swedish administrative registers, we build an individual-level data set including information on voter turnout and various characteristics. Our turnout data come from the 2010 elections in which the turnout rates in the national and municipal elections were 84.6% and 81.6%, respectively, and 84.4% of the voters voted in both elections (Statistics Sweden 2020). A small fraction of voters eligible to vote in both elections abstained selectively: 1.61% voted in the national but not the municipal elections, and 0.11% voted in the municipal but not the parliamentary elections. We observe the turnout outcomes and various characteristics of more than six and a half million voters in total. Appendix A provides further information on the data.

## 3. Theoretical considerations

What could explain the selective abstention that we see in our data? In this section, we provide theoretical insights on the question before proceeding to our empirical investigation. We first describe how selective abstention may be associated with the costs and benefits of voting on a more abstract level, after which we discuss how we can (indirectly) measure these factors using different socio-demographic characteristics.

Our departure point is the well-known calculus of voting framework (Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968).<sup>4</sup> A voter chooses to vote if the utility he or she derives from voting exceeds the cost of doing so—formally, if  $pB + D > C$ . Here,  $p$  is the probability of an individual’s vote influencing the electoral outcome, bringing the voter a benefit  $B$  if realized.  $D$  is an additional payoff that a voter obtains from the act of voting, such as utility from fulfilling a citizen duty, and  $C$  is the cost of voting.

We argue that factors that explain voter turnout are also likely to influence selective abstention. Our focus is on  $C$  and  $D$  which vary across voters and which are closely connected with the socioeconomic and demographic voter characteristics that we observe.<sup>5</sup>

Theoretical work suggests that the costs explaining selective abstention are not *fixed costs* such as the time spent on traveling to a polling station. Instead, there are psychological *informational costs* that a voter faces if he or she has limited information on candidates and parties and might “mistakenly” vote for the wrong candidate or party (Ghirardato and Katz 2006; Matsusaka 1995).<sup>6</sup> These arguments are in line with Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1996) who formally show that less

<sup>4</sup> See also Feddersen (2004) for a review of the rational choice theory and the paradox of not voting.

<sup>5</sup> Our empirical analyses thus abstract from the role of  $p$  and  $B$ . Arguably, these factors could still vary across elections and shape selective abstention. For example, a single vote might be decisive in a small local government election, making  $p$  greater. However, recent evidence suggests that  $p$  might not have a considerable weight in voters’ decisions (Enos and Fowler, 2014). Andersen, Fiva, and Natvik (2014) find that voter turnout in local election increases relative to regional elections when municipalities have more financial flexibility to provide pork for voters. See also Geys (2006) for a review of aggregate-level determinants of voter turnout.

<sup>6</sup> See also Blais et al. (2019) who use data from five countries to assess the impact of voting costs on voter turnout decisions. They document that the effect of voting costs is relatively small and direct costs matters more than informational costs.

informed, indifferent voters strictly prefer abstaining over voting, even when voting is costless.

There may also be other types of costs that matter for selective abstention. Voters who are part of a tight social network may be monitored by their peers, which could increase the cost of not voting (Feddersen 2004). Related to this argument, one might expect that voters who are more engaged with the local community may also have a greater sense of a civic duty, increasing the propensity to vote in elections at all levels of government (Leighly 1996).

Costs and benefits of voting rarely are directly observable to the researcher, and our setting is not an exception. However, research on voter turnout has pointed out that a number of socioeconomic and demographic characteristics have a strong link with such factors (Almond and Verba 1963; Brady et al. 1995; Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).<sup>7</sup> The emphasis of this paper is on traits that we are able to capture using the information from the Swedish administrative registers.

One of the most prominent arguments in the voter turnout literature is that citizens with a higher socio-economic status are better informed than less-educated and lower-income citizens. Therefore, they face lower (information) costs of voting which should make them less likely to selectively abstain in simultaneous elections. By the same token, many demographic characteristics are correlated with resources of importance for the turnout decision, and also with benefits that individuals derive from the act of voting. Older people are less likely to selectively abstain, because they tend to have become more involved with public affairs and more connected with their communities. For similar reasons, geographical mobility may matter: people who have lived longer in a particular municipality are expected to be less likely to selectively abstain in local elections. Mobility could also be associated with the costs of voting. People who have recently moved to a new municipality may be less familiar with the local political environment and will therefore have to exert more effort into finding a suitable candidate or party.<sup>8</sup> Another plausible channel through which it could matter for political behavior is home ownership (Hall and Yoder 2020): individuals who have lived a longer time in a particular location are also more likely to own property there which is also likely to boost participation in local elections. However, the data we have access to do not contain any individual-level information on home ownership and we are therefore not able to test this particular hypothesis.

In many cases, the association between individual-level traits and selective abstention is ambiguous. For instance, Kostelka et al. (2019) argue that women are less psychologically engaged in politics and thus less likely to vote in second-order elections. In contrast, authors such as Carreras (2018) have suggested that women exhibit a higher sense of civic duty than men. This should instead make them less likely to selectively abstain. Moreover, it is unclear how people with an immigrant background turn out to vote in elections at different levels. On the one hand, immigrants may come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and they might experience language barriers to acquiring political information especially at lower-level elections. Then again, naturalization might play some role and increase voter participation, for instance, by boosting the feeling of social inclusion (Bevelander and Pendakur 2011).

<sup>7</sup> These ideas are often referred to as the resource model of voter turnout. There are also other theories that explain turnout decisions at the individual level with mobilization, socialization, or psychological factors (see Smets and van Ham 2013 for a review and a meta-analysis of the empirical literature). We abstain from discussing these theories in detail, as we cannot test them due to data limitations.

<sup>8</sup> Note that, in our context, those eligible to vote are automatically registered as voters in all elections. Thus, geographical mobility cannot affect (selective) turnout through registration costs in our case (Highton 2000; Squire et al. 1987).

#### 4. Empirical analysis

We estimate a linear probability model (using OLS) to quantify the connection between voter characteristics and selective abstention in Swedish elections. We regress an indicator variable for selective abstention on a set of socio-economic and demographic covariates. Besides characteristics that influence voting behavior at the individual level, there are a number of institutional and other macro-level factors that may play a role. To keep the electoral environment fixed, our specifications control for municipality fixed effects. That way, we control for all factors that are common to all voters voting in a particular municipality, such as the probability of being pivotal for the election outcome.<sup>9</sup>

We measure selective abstention using two different indicator variables: (i) turning out to vote in at least one of the three elections but abstaining in at least one, or (ii) voting only in either the local or the national election which are more salient elections than the regional election. Thus, when interpreting the results it is important to bear in mind that our focus is not on turnout per se. Instead, we estimate the effects of socio-economic and demographic factors on turnout in one but not the other election conditional on already having made it to the voting booth.<sup>10</sup> In practice, this means that we condition our analyses either on voting in any election, or on voting in either the local or the national election. Doing so guarantees that our findings are not confounded by factors that matter for the initial turnout decision.

The regression results are reported in Table 1. Note that we multiply the dependent variable by 100 so that the regression coefficients can be interpreted as percentage point changes in the probability of selective abstention. Let us start by focusing on the estimation results in columns (1) and (3). First, we see that socio-economic status matters. Earning 10,000 SEK (about 1000 USD) more is associated with a 0.02 percentage point decrease in selective abstention, and having one more year of education is associated with a decrease of 0.22–0.29 percentage points. These regression coefficients are statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). Unemployed individuals are 0.29–0.49 percentage points more likely to selectively abstain. Overall, these results are in line with the argument that people from higher socio-economic backgrounds have more political information which decreases the costs of voting. This further makes participation in all elections more likely.

Second, demographic characteristics are important. A one-year increase in age decreases the propensity of selective abstention by 0.06–0.08 percentage points. Having lived one more year in a municipality prior to the election is associated with a decrease of 0.25–0.28 percentage points in selective abstention. These results are consistent with a lower  $C$  or a higher  $D$  for older voters or voters who have not moved recently. Selective abstention in any election is, on average, 0.48–0.80 percentage points lower among women than men, which is in line with the idea of female voters having a higher sense of civic duty to vote. Interestingly, a final remark is that immigrants (who are naturalized citizens) are 0.34–0.60 percentage points more likely to vote in all elections than native Swedes. This result may seem a bit surprising given the well-known fact that immigrants in general have lower turnout rates

<sup>9</sup> We present a number of robustness checks in the Online Appendix. First, we re-estimate our models omitting municipality fixed effects. The results remain virtually identical to those that we present here (Appendix Table B1). Second, our conclusions hold if we regress selective abstention on socio-economic and demographic characteristics separately (Appendix Tables B2 and B3). Third and last, we acquire similar results also if we use a non-linear logit specification (Appendix Table B4). Despite the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, we use an OLS specification in our main analysis. The OLS specification is particularly appealing as it facilitates easier interpretation of the point estimates as well as the inclusion of the fixed effects.

<sup>10</sup> We explore alternative definitions of selective abstention in Appendix Table B5. We come to similar conclusions also if we look at selective abstention in the national or the regional election, or the regional or the local election.

**Table 1**  
Determinants of selective and complete voter abstention.

	Selective abstention (any election)		Selective abstention (local or national)		Complete abstention	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Income (10,000 SEK)	-0.022*** (0.002)	-0.011*** (0.003)	-0.021*** (0.002)	-0.009*** (0.003)	-0.129*** (0.009)	-0.076*** (0.011)
Years of education	-0.292*** (0.019)	-0.167*** (0.031)	-0.220*** (0.013)	-0.101*** (0.024)	-2.113*** (0.024)	-1.073*** (0.055)
Unemployed	0.490*** (0.056)	0.748 (0.465)	0.285*** (0.046)	0.457 (0.344)	-0.653*** (0.124)	-1.275* (0.692)
Age	-0.083*** (0.005)	-0.038*** (0.005)	-0.063*** (0.004)	-0.032*** (0.005)	-0.088*** (0.010)	-0.016 (0.010)
Years in municipality	-0.025*** (0.005)	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.028*** (0.002)	-0.007* (0.004)	-0.112*** (0.011)	-0.032*** (0.010)
Female	-0.795*** (0.047)	-0.573*** (0.118)	-0.483*** (0.034)	-0.258*** (0.089)	-1.672*** (0.054)	-1.299*** (0.263)
Immigrant	-0.600*** (0.144)	0.272 (0.269)	-0.341*** (0.075)	-0.032 (0.189)	13.505*** (0.418)	7.882*** (0.478)
Lagged dependent variable		16.455*** (1.192)		12.622*** (1.236)		42.186*** (0.823)
Year	2010	2014	2010	2014	2010	2014
Observations	5,703,614	43,197	5,738,934	43,612	6,643,367	52,929

Notes: The dependent variable is an indicator variable (multiplied by 100) for selective abstention in any election in columns (1) and (2), selective abstention in either the local or national election in columns (3) and (4), and not voting in any election in columns (5) and (6). The estimations in columns (1) and (2) are conditional on voting in any election, and the estimations in columns (3) and (4) are conditional on voting in either the local or the national election. All specifications control for municipality fixed effects. Robust standard errors that are clustered at the municipality level are reported in parentheses. \*\*\*, \*\* and \* denote statistical significance at 1%, 5% and 10% levels, respectively.

than natives. However, once again it is important to note that the negative effect of being immigrant on selective abstention is conditional on turning up at the polls in the first place.

To understand whether selective participation is a persistent phenomenon, or perhaps just a one-time error, we also estimate a specification in which we include the lagged dependent variable. For the purpose of this test, we use data from the 2014 elections in which we observe a random and representative sample of the voters. We link these voters to their turnout behavior in the 2010 election. If selective electoral participation is persistent, we ought to see a positive correlation between past selective abstention and selective abstention today. This is, indeed, the case (columns 2 and 4 in Table 1). In fact, past selective turnout turns out to be by far the strongest predictor of selective turnout in the current election: voters who selectively abstained in the 2010 elections are 12.6–16.46 percentage points more likely to abstain again four years later. This stickiness in selective abstention resonates with what has been documented in the context of voter turnout decisions (Bechtel et al. 2018; Garmann 2020).

Note also that not all of our descriptive results persist when we control for the lagged dependent variable. In particular, the regression coefficients for *Years in municipality* and *Immigrant* are no longer statistically significant. The latter even changes its sign when the additional covariate is included. The regression coefficient for *Unemployed* is marginally significant in column (2) but insignificant in column (4). Many of the estimates also tend towards zero when we control for lagged (selective) abstention. The discrepancies may be partially due to differences in the 2014 sample and the overall population. In Appendix Table B6, we rerun the analyses in the odd columns using the same sample of voters in 2010. These results are very similar to the correlations that we find in the 2014 sample.

In most cases, the same characteristics that predict selective abstention also predict overall abstention. Columns (5) and (6) report the correlation between voter abstention (in all elections) and voter characteristics. There are, however, two notable exceptions. First, voters with an immigrant background are less likely to selectively abstain, conditional on having turned out to vote, but more likely to abstain overall. Second, unemployed voters are more likely to selectively abstain while they instead are less likely to abstain overall.

We conclude our analysis by analyzing the turnout gap using data that are aggregated to the municipality level. These regression results

are available in Appendix Table C1. Our exercise highlights the importance of individual-level data, if we want to properly understand what kind of factors explain selective abstention in simultaneous elections and to what extent. The patterns that we find in Table 1 do not emerge when we study the correlates of selective abstention using the aggregate-level data; some of the regression coefficients are statistically insignificant, and the magnitude of the point estimates changes considerably due to the aggregation. These remarks echo the findings of Matsusaka and Palda (1993) who compare correlates of voter turnout in Canadian survey and aggregate data, indicating that the latter specification may lead to an ecological fallacy.

## 5. Closing remarks

We document new empirical facts on what kind of people selectively abstain in simultaneous elections. Using administrative data on voter turnout and characteristics from Swedish elections, we demonstrate that the phenomenon is associated with a set of socio-economic and demographic characteristics that are related to individuals' sense of civic duty to vote and informational costs of (not) voting. Naturally, this leaves room for further work on how other theories of voter turnout could help understanding selective abstention.

Our results have some practical implications. Voter turnout may come with wide-ranging electoral and policy consequences (Aggeborn 2016; Fowler 2013; Fujiwara 2015; Hansford and Gomez 2010). Similarly, the differences in turnout rates could be pivotal for the outcomes of local elections. In our context, close elections frequently happen within political parties (Folke et al. 2016), between political parties (Folke 2014), and between party blocs (Pettersson-Lidbom 2008). Selective abstention can thus matter for representation and policy outcomes.

Moreover, knowing what type of citizens are more likely to abstain selectively can help designing policies intended to boost turnout. For example, voters who have already born the cost of voting might be the easiest to persuade in get-out-the-vote experiments (Green and Gerber 2015). They should also be more likely to react to information on political platforms of candidates and other important topics which should help reduce the information costs associated with voting.

## Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102302>.

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