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Geography and Political Participation

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Abstract: This chapter examines the various ways in which the concerns of academic geography help illuminate understandings of political participation. Features of the physical environment, from weather conditions to the distance potential participants may have to travel to take part in political action have some effect on participation. But the major geographical affects reflect the compositional make-up of the communities in which political action takes place, and wider contextual influences related to local climates of opinion peer pressure and mobilization in place. While compositional effects reflect who lives where (and the extent to which the individuals in each place are themselves inclined to participate, contextual effects involve individuals reaction to the real and perceived actions, beliefs and norms of others in their community regarding political action.

Keywords: Compositional; Contextual; Place; Distance; Peer pressure; Mobilization.

As a showcase of political participation, the 2020 US Presidential Election season took some beating. In a highly partisan and polarized contest, electoral turnout rose to 66.8% of the eligible voting population, on some estimates its highest level since 1900.¹ Citizens campaigned for their preferred candidates, displayed posters, discussed the election with friends, families, workmates and relative strangers, and many joined in various protests and rallies. Some took part in demonstrations which occasionally veered into illegality – with the events sparked by the Stop the Steal rally on January 6th 2021 in Washington DC as perhaps the most egregious example.

There were clear and striking geographies to that participation. While both the numbers and the proportions voting rose in almost every part of the country, turnout was not the same everywhere. It varied substantially between states (from 80% of eligible voters in Minnesota to just 55% in Oklahoma) and even more between Congressional districts and between counties.

The election infrastructure also created geographies of participation. Arrangements for voting varied substantially across the country. In response to the COVID pandemic, many states took steps to make mail-in voting much easier, and provided more facilities at which voters could drop in already-completed ballots. But most voters still turned out in person to vote. In many areas, long lines formed at polling stations, even for early voting. This was exacerbated in some states by reductions in the number of polling stations available, meaning more voters had to attend fewer locations (often further from their homes). That, too, had its own geography, linked to which party controlled the state government. Many Democrat-controlled states eased controls, while many Republican ones made voting harder.

¹ Data from the United States Elections Project, last updated 7th December 2020: <http://www.electproject.org/2020g>.

Other political activities related to the election were also affected by geography. Symbolic locations were (as they often are) the focus for symbolic actions. In the months before the election, several State Houses were the foci of protests over a variety of issues, including perceived threats to 2nd Amendment rights and State authorities' COVID lockdown measures. And the iconography of holding the January 6th Stop the Steal protest on the National Mall was clear, as was the symbolism of marching on and forcibly entering the Capitol. In all these forms of political participation, place mattered.

This chapter elaborates on that by examining how the insights offered by the study of geography help us understand political participation? As a subject, geography is concerned with where things happen. This is not simply a matter of simple locational description: each place provides a unique combination of factors coming together in the same site, creating something which is larger than the simple sum of the individual parts. People are influenced not only by their own circumstances, but by their surrounding geographical contexts. While there is not a large tradition of research in political participation among academic geographers (though some do work in that area), the ideas and concepts underpinning the discipline do resonate with and inform work on the subject by scholars in other disciplines. What is the geography of political participation? How does it relate to other political, social and economic geographies? How do citizens' social contexts affect their participation, and how are those contexts shaped geographically? And what role does geography play in the mobilization of participation?

Mapping political participation

All political participation takes place somewhere. And where citizens are can influence how likely they are to participate. Many forms of political engagement are catalyzed by local events and issues. For instance, policy decisions may affect some areas more than others. People in the affected areas may be more likely to engage in political action (whether to oppose unwelcome proposals or to support more desirable ones) than are people in more distant, less affected places. And even when it comes to national political events, such as general elections, participation can and does vary significantly from place to place. There is a distinct geography of turnout in most democracies.

Strikingly, that geography of electoral participation is often very stable. The very strong positive correlation ($r = 0.926$) between constituency turnout at the 2017 and 2019 British general elections illustrates the point (figure 1). Nor is this limited to the UK. There are strong and persistent geographies of turnout in many other countries. To take one example, analyses of county-level turnout in US Presidential elections shows persistently high levels of positive spatial autocorrelation. Areas where turnout is high tend to be surrounded by other high turnout areas, while low turnout counties tend to have low turnout neighbours (Darmofal, 2006).

What might account for these variations in electoral participation? To some degree, turnout (and other forms of participation) can be affected by brute physical geography. Electoral folk wisdom suggests that bad weather on polling day depresses turnout, as rational voters, knowing their personal participation is exceptionally unlikely to sway the election result, opt to stay at home rather than face the inclement conditions in order to vote. While the weather

may be rather unpredictable, it can and does vary from place to place, and on any given election day, the sun can be shining in some areas while other areas experience rain (or worse). And it seems there is substance to the folk wisdom. Analyses of the effects of local weather conditions on the geography of election turnout in a variety of countries (including France, the Netherlands, Ireland and the USA have found that where it rained, turnout went down somewhat, but warmer, sunnier conditions locally were associated with higher turnout levels (Lakdhar and Dubois, 2006; Eisinga, Grotenhuis and Pelzer, 2012; Garcia-Rodriguez and Redmond, 2020; Knack, 1994). That said, the effect was neither large nor strong – and several studies have found no clear effect (see e.g. Persson, Sundell and Öhrvall, 2014; Mughan, 1986).

Whatever the real effect of climatic conditions on electoral participation, however, weather is a largely random and uncontrollable factor. Other ‘gross’ geographical influences are much more political malleable (for good or ill). In-person voting at designated local polling stations is still very much the norm in most electoral systems, and that can affect participation, especially where alternative means of voting, such as mail ballots, are either unavailable or only available in exceptional circumstances. How accessible polling stations are for voters can affect whether they turn out. Travel to the polling station is a cost. Not all voters have the time, or the good health, or the access to transport needed to make the trip an easy one. And – in line with rational choice expectations, as the costs associated with accessing the polling station increase, the odds of voting are liable to go down. Numerous studies – from countries like Britain, the USA, Denmark and Canada – confirm this. Other things being equal, the further voters live from their nearest polling station, the less likely they are to vote (Clinton et al., 2020; Bhatti, 2012; Orford et al., 2008; Gimpel and Schuknecht, 2003; Garnett and Grogan, 2021). And, where drop boxes are used to collect ballots, voters are more likely to use proximate than distant drop boxes (Collinwood and O’Brien, 2021).

The effects of distance to polling location on turnout are, however, neither simply linear nor evenly spread across the electorate. Several studies report non-linear trends, with the depressing effect of distance on turnout declining as travel times to polling locations increase (see e.g. Garnett and Grogan, 2021). At longer distances, turnout can even start to increase again. A study of turnout in three Maryland counties found that, other things being equal, the costs of distance and the decline in turnout were greatest in urban precincts which were around 2 to 5 miles from their nearest polling location (Gimpel and Schuknecht, 2003). But turnout was, on average, slightly higher in rural precincts with longer journeys to the nearest polling location – a finding attributed to easier commuting on less congested rural roads.

Unlike the weather, polling stations’ accessibility can be manipulated. If the wish is to increase turnout, the density of polling stations can be increased, reducing average distances to nearest polling station (or all-mail balloting can be introduced, substantially reducing the friction of distance: Richey, 2008). But cutting the number of polling stations available in an area risks reducing turnout – especially among voters, often the more marginalized, whose participation is less certain. Both strategies are also open to partisan manipulation, depending on who controls decisions over commissioning polling stations, and whether they calculate that higher or lower turnout is likely to be their advantage (either by increasing the likelihood of their own supporters voting, or by suppressing the vote for rival parties).

In the run-up to the 2020 Presidential election, access to polling stations became a major issue in many parts of the USA, amid accusations (mainly from Democrats) that Republican legislators were deliberately reducing the number of polling stations available in Democrat areas. As noted at the start of the chapter, such tactics resulted in very long lines of voters queuing outside polling stations in many areas. In practice, however, the overall depressing effect on turnout was almost certainly partially offset in the 2020 contest by extensive use of early voting and easier mailing voting in many states (e.g. Clinton et al., 2020).

Socio-economic geographies of participation

While the physical environment has some effect on who, and how many, participate, however, it is not the only, or even the main, influence on the geography of participation. Political, social and economic factors are far more influential. We can usefully differentiate their effects into compositional and contextual processes (Thrift, 1983; Johnston and Pattie, 2006). Compositional processes are largely driven by the varying social composition of different communities. Individuals' propensity to participate in politics (or to do other things) are influenced by their personal characteristics – their age, occupation, education and so on. A compositional geography of participation is created when these individual influences also exhibit a geography – as, for instance, when localities are differentiated on lines of wealth or ethnicity. Contextual effects, meanwhile, are derived from the geographical context itself: individuals are influenced not only by their own characteristics and circumstances, but also by the wider environment within which they live – their families, neighbourhoods, workplaces and so on. This section considers evidence for compositional effects on the geography of participation, while the next section examines contextual effects.

As discussed in other chapters, a key finding of the research into the correlates of individual political participation is that the resource-rich are more likely to take part than the resource-poor (see e.g. Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995; Parry, Moyser and Day, 1992; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004; Whiteley, 2011). Other things being equal, affluent middle class university graduates are more likely to engage in most (but not necessarily all) forms of political participation than are less affluent, working class people with fewer formal qualifications. Money, class and education lubricate participation.

In most modern societies, money, class and education also influence where people live. While some areas prosper economically, others are dominated by declining industries (Lloyd 2016; Storper, 2018). The implications for local labour markets are profound. World cities like New York, London and Paris provide very well-rewarded employment for high-flying middle class graduates (Beverstock and Hall, 2012; Florida and Mellander, 2018). But in communities like the smaller industrial cities of Britain or the United States' 'rustbelt', economic prospects are less promising and well-remunerated jobs are fewer and further between. These processes of socio-economic differentiation are repeated at more local, intra-urban, scales too, further sorting individuals into relatively socially, economically and politically internally homogenous communities (Bishop and Cushing, 2009; Owens, 2019).

By shaping the socio-economic composition of communities, geographical sorting also contributes to a geography of political participation. Some communities are disproportionately comprised of individuals from groups (the less affluent, the less formally

educated, the more economically marginalized) who are less likely to participate in most forms of politics. Others (the haunts of affluent middle class graduates, for instance) are disproportionately made up of residents who are generally more likely to participate.

Electoral turnout once again illustrates the point. Across a range of different countries and elections, turnout generally tends to be highest in more affluent communities, and lower in less affluent and more marginalized ones (e.g. Hill and Leighley, 1999; Pattie and Johnston, 2006; Mansley and Demšar, 2015; Denver, 2020; Stadlmair, 2020). For instance, constituency turnout levels in Britain's 2019 General Election correlate quite strongly with a number of measures of local socio-economic conditions (table 1: all correlations exclude constituencies in Northern Ireland, and the constituency of the House of Commons Speaker, and all are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$). The higher the proportion of local workers in middle class managerial and professional occupations at the 2011 Census, the higher the turnout there in 2019 (by and large, the social geography of the UK did not change radically between 2011 and 2019, so the 2011 Census, the most recent available at the time of writing, is a good indicator for most things). Turnout was also higher in areas where a greater proportion of households were owned by the occupants. The higher the proportion of university graduates living in an area, the higher the proportions voting. And the proportion of the population aged over 65 was also positively associated with turnout. The negative correlates of turnout (the proportion working in 'routine' working class occupations, the proportion renting their home; the proportion with no formal qualifications, the proportion of households owning no car, and the proportion of workers in an area claiming state benefits in September 2019, on the eve of the election) tell the same story from the opposite perspective: the fewer socio-economic resources residents of a community had, the lower electoral participation there.

The compositional effect extends to other marginalized groups in society with low participation rates and spatially concentrated distributions. In the USA and the UK, for instance, turnout is often lower among Black and Minority Ethnic voters – and hence in the communities and districts with high concentrations of BAME citizens (Hill and Leighley, 1999).

Other, largely compositional, features of local communities can also have an effect on participation. For instance, inner urban areas with dynamic and rapidly changing populations often exhibit lower-than-expected participation in elections (e.g. Geys, 2006; Hoffman and Lazaridis, 2013). Where there are high levels of population turnover, many individuals move house frequently. For some, this may mean they drop off the electoral register. Others might not be 'in place' to vote when an election occurs (and unless they have had the foresight to organize postal voting where that is possible, may not be able to vote). Yet others, because of the transient nature of their residence in an area, may not feel sufficiently committed to the area to vote in elections there.

Friends, neighbours and the contextual geography of participation

From the compositional, therefore, where participation is more (less) likely to take place reflects in part the sorts of people living there, and the likelihood that the groups they belong to will participate. To that extent, there is a geography of participation, but not a geography

of the underlying behaviour, as the influences on participation are the same everywhere. But this is not the whole story: some communities poor in resources are relatively rich in participation, and *vice-versa*. The compositional geography of socio-economic conditions cannot fully explain the geography of participation (Lowndes et al., 2006). Context matters: there is a geography of behaviour as well as one of participation. When deciding on whether (and how) to participate politically, people are influenced by local events and circumstances, and by the views and actions of those they live among.

To some extent, these contextual variations reflect geographical variations in the opportunities and reasons for political engagement. Protests against hospital closures, for instance, are liable to be most intense in those communities directly served by the hospitals under threat (e.g. Brown, 2003). Plans for the location of noxious or undesirable facilities are most likely to generate active opposition in those communities most closely affected by the proposal, as local residents try to protect local amenities – a process often (and generally pejoratively, though simplistically) referred to as the NIMBY (not in my back yard) syndrome (e.g. Kemp, 1990; Gibson, 2005).

A very clear example is provided by the geography of the (highly politicized) strike in the UK's coal mining industry in the mid-1980s (Sunley, 1990; Griffiths and Johnston, 1991). The strike pitted the National Union of Mineworkers against the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, in a dispute over threats of colliery closures (though it also involved very different views of British politics and society).

Participation in the strike followed a very clear geographical 'opportunity structure' reflecting the geography of the UK's coalfields. The coalfield communities were strongly working class in nature, and at the heart of the strike were concerns over livelihoods and the long-term viability of the communities themselves. It was there, too, that a substantial 'Coalfields Communities' campaign took root, drawing in other local people, not least women, many of whom were partners of striking miners (Beal, 2005). Similar 'opportunity structures' have guided the geography of other strikes elsewhere (Stillerman, 2003; Smith, 2015; Nowak, 2016).

The UK's 1984-85 Miners' Strike reveals a further dimension in understanding the geography of political participation: the importance of (often long-standing) local political and social cultures. Participation in, and support for, the strike was very strong in some coalfield areas, but very limited in others. To take two examples, while the Yorkshire coalfield was one of the most militant, in the Nottinghamshire field just to the south, most miners opposed the strike and carried on working. Almost exactly the same geography of relative militancy and moderation were evident 60 years previously, during the mining strike which precipitated (and outlasted) the General Strike of 1926 (Sunley, 1990). Underlying factors included different modalities of union organization in different coalfields, different working practices, and different relations (pre-nationalization) between mine owners and workers (Griffiths and Johnston, 1991). Local cultures and norms of political behaviour varied from place to place, even within ostensibly similar communities, and persisted across generations. People took their cues from what happened around them – how did others in their communities and networks think and act, and what was seen as 'acceptable' in terms of engagement.

Contextual effects which encourage or discourage participation arise from interactions between people. The more people interact with a wide range of others, the more likely they are to develop a sense that strangers can generally be trusted, and from that, the more likely they become to participate in a range of political activities (Putnam, 1993, 2000). Those interactions can be formal or informal, long-established or relatively fleeting, so long as they involve encountering a diverse range of others, building ‘bridging’ social capital. Much of that interaction takes place within individuals’ local social networks (Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998; Krishna, 2002). And patterns of sociability and involvement in communities varies both over time and over space. In a now-classic analysis, Putnam (1993) showed substantial regional and local variations in sociability and community participation across Italy had knock-on consequences for the geography of trust and political participation. Where individuals were involved in extensive networks of association, political participation was also relatively high: where they were less engaged with others, participation fell (a finding replicated in many other contexts: see e.g. Carreras and Bowler, 2019). Crucially, the positive benefits of bridging social capital are not limited only to those individuals who themselves engage in local community activities, but extend to others in the community: where social capital is stronger, the probability of participation goes up, both for those active in the community and for those who are not active. There is a clear contextual effect, operating both directly through individuals’ contacts with others, and indirectly through wider effects on the local climate of opinion.

Both the direct and indirect routes through which contextual effects can work have been traced at a variety of geographical scales. At perhaps the most intimate of political contexts, there is ample evidence of individuals’ decisions on whether (and how) to participate in politics being influenced by the views and actions of their fellow household members. Political socialization within families clearly plays a part here (Zuckerman et al., 2007; Neundorf and Smets 2017). Politically active parents tend to have politically active children – and younger household members are particularly sensitive to how much other household members participate in politics (Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2012). Nor are these simple family effects. Cohabitation (including in multiple occupancy homes containing several otherwise unrelated adults) provides a context which can foster or thwart political participation. The more other adults in one’s household participate politically, the more likely one is to do so too (Johnston et al., 2005; Cutts and Fieldhouse, 2009; Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2006, 2018; Buton et al., 2012).

But are these genuine household-level contextual effects, or are they the result of homophilic sorting in household selection? People who choose to live together often opt to live with others who share their lifestyles and outlooks (McPherson et al. 2001). We could, after all, simply be picking up the propensity for those who enjoy engaging in political action to seek out other politically active individuals to live with, and for those who would rather avoid political participation to find similarly like-minded co-habitees.

Controlling for shared social backgrounds among household members, there does still seem to be an independent (and substantial) household effect on political participation (see e.g. Cutts and Fieldhouse, 2006). Even so, the possibility remains that political participation itself might be a distinctive basis for homophilic sorting into households: statistical controls alone do not resolve the issue. Carefully designed experimental studies can, however, offer insight. In a get-out-the-vote experiment, Nickerson (2008) targeted two-person households. A

canvasser knocked on each household's door and offered the adult who answered either a leaflet encouraging them to vote or one promoting recycling. Which leaflet the individual received was decided at random. The other adult in the household was not contacted by the research team. Post-election analysis of the household members' turnout showed both that receiving the 'get out the vote' message boosted the participation of the person answering the door to the canvasser, and also raised the chances that the other adult in the household would also vote. Indeed, Nickerson estimates that almost two-thirds of the get out the vote effect was passed on to the second household member, suggesting an important contagion effect, and intra-household influence on participation. Homophily is clearly an issue, therefore, but it is not the whole story.

What is more, household effects on participation can interact with the wider local context. Members of politically homogeneous households (where all adults share the same political outlook) reinforce each other's participation (Bélanger and Eagles, 2007). But this effect seems to be strongest where the household is in the political minority locally. Other things being equal, it seems those who are in a minority locally risk being discouraged from participating, but the reinforcement of living with a like-minded partner can help offset this (see also McClurg, 2006).

Blais et al. (2019) examine whether the contextual influence of family, household and friends operates mainly through what they describe as 'injunctive' channels (that is, from being on the receiving end of direct exhortations to get involved), or from more 'descriptive' ones (i.e. being influenced by the example of others' behaviour). On the whole, their analysis suggests descriptive influences loom larger – and it is particularly the example of others in one's household that matter. Even so, injunctive pressures matter too (Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2020): being told one should (or should not) participate by those close to one does make a difference.

That said, while the friends and family provide a powerful (often, the most powerful) contextual influence on participation, it is not the only one. The actions and beliefs (real and perceived) of other members of the local community (including strangers) can also be influential. Here, we shift from direct contextual effects to more indirect influences. Knowledge and expectations of what others in the local community are liable to do and will think is 'normal' behaviour regarding political participation can have an influence on individuals' own decisions of whether to take part (Pattie and Johnston, 2013).

A sense of what others in the community think and do politically is based on actual experience of those communities. Analyses of political conversation networks between citizens which examine where discussants live tend to find that, on average people live quite close to their discussion partners – most often within just a few miles (Baybeck and Huckfeldt, 2002; Eagles et al., 2004). Cues regarding the local political context are liable to be taken from non-verbal and observational experiences too (e.g. Mutz, 1998). Are there visible signs of political participation locally (perhaps campaign posters, canvass activity, high turnout in elections, visible campaigns over local issues, and so on). Or is there little or no visible activity in the local community? Do casual acquaintances express their political views and declare an interest in taking part themselves – or do they express the view that participation is a waste of time? All of these cues can (and are) picked up by people as they go about their daily lives, and help them develop a sense of the local political context.

Individuals' chances of participating in a wide range of forms of political action are influenced by whether they think other people in their networks and communities think participation is worthwhile. Other things being equal, the greater their perception that others in the community think participation is a valuable activity, the more likely they are themselves to participate – though the effect of perceived community norms is stronger for those who are themselves less politically engaged than for individuals with a strong personal interest in politics (Pattie and Johnston, 2013, 187).

Experimental get-out-the-vote studies, which manipulate the information participants receive about levels of political activity in their communities, report similar effects (see e.g. Green and Gerber, 2004; Gerber et al., 2008, 2010; Panagopoulos, 2010). Other things being equal, individuals who receive messages encouraging them to vote are more likely to do so than are individuals who receive no such message). But individuals who were not only exhorted to vote but who were also told that many other people in the locality were voting were even more likely to turn out.

The evidence is clear: particularly where people are themselves otherwise less inclined to participate politically, the influence of others locally can be very important, whether directly or indirectly. Being surrounded by politically active family members, friends or communities can increase one's own chances of taking part, whether because of positive persuasion, or because people feel ashamed of not following perceived family and local norms. What is more, there is evidence that such effects can prove long lasting (Davenport et al., 2010): people hold on to that sense of the local context for participation, and it influences their behaviour into the future.

The geography of mobilisation

The experimental studies discussed in the previous section highlight two other key contextual factors influencing the geography of political participation: political mobilization and campaigning. Classic rational choice accounts of collective action suggest that fully rational citizens will not participate politically, as the chances their personal involvement will prove decisive are generally vanishingly small (Downs, 1957; Olson, 1965). Few citizens are quite so rational. But there is evidence that people are more likely to participate when the probable outcome of a political decision is finely balanced between competing options than where it is largely a foregone conclusion. Participation is lower in social and economically homogenous local authorities, where there is widespread political agreement, than in very heterogenous authorities where there is considerable disagreement and which party will control the local government hangs in the balance (Oliver, 2001).

Once again, electoral turnout illustrates how this might affect participation. The logic is particularly clear in constituency-based plurality electoral systems, where the geography of party support means that some electoral districts are highly competitive between parties, while others are much less so. Under such conditions, variations in constituency marginality create variations in the contextual incentives to vote. The more marginal the constituency, other things being equal, the less certain the result, and hence the greater the incentive to participate in the election in order to maximize the chances of one's preferred candidate winning. But in safer seats, that incentive to participate falls, as many potential votes are

liable to be wasted. Supporters of the likely local winner will gain a congenial representative whether they vote or not. Once their preferred candidate has achieved a plurality of the votes locally, any extra votes for the candidate are surplus to requirement, and hence wasted. So supporters of the locally dominant party in safe seats might reasonably decide to stay home, secure in the knowledge that their candidate will win anyway. Supporters of rival parties in such areas, meanwhile, have little realistic chance of their preferred outcome and so might decide turning out to vote in a locally lost cause is not worth the aggravation: their vote, should they cast it, would be wasted too as it would do nothing to increase their party's representation. Under plurality conditions (but not so much in more proportional electoral systems, where fewer votes are wasted: Stockemer, 2015), therefore, the geography of electoral turnout might be expected to follow the geography of constituency marginality, because more potential votes are wasted in safer than in more marginal seats.

And so it often proves. Numerous studies have found reasonably strong negative correlations between the majority of the winning party in a constituency at one election and the turnout there at the next in plurality contests (Denver and Hands, 1974, 1985; Denver, Hands and McAllister, 2003; Pattie and Johnston, 1998a; Gilliam, 1985; Jou, 2010; Geys, 2006; Fauvelle-Aymar and François, 2006; Stockemer, 2015). The bigger the gap between the winning party in a seat and its nearest rival at one election (and hence the smaller the chance of the rival party unseating the incumbent), the lower the turnout in the seat at the following election. As implied in the preceding discussion, most aggregate studies measure how competitive local races are using information on constituency marginality at the preceding election.

Even so, the relationship between marginality and turnout in plurality elections is neither steady nor always visible. In some contests, the link can be quite strong; at others it can be much weaker or even non-existent (Pattie and Johnston, 2005). And the aggregate correlation between closeness and participation is not always replicated at the level of individual voters (e.g. Matsusaka 1993; Matsusaka & Palda 1993; Pattie and Johnston, 1998b; 2005).

In fact, the perceived competitiveness of a local contest may matter more than 'objective' measures (Pattie and Johnston, 2005). The effect of periodic redistricting of constituency boundaries on turnout illustrates the point. In any redistricting, some electoral districts might be changed very substantially while others hardly alter. We might expect this to affect turnout. Voters in highly disrupted areas lose both easy information on competitiveness from past elections and may also feel a weaker sense of attachment to their new electoral district than might voters in areas where little has changed. But in fact changing seats does not change participation (Pattie et al., 2012). Indeed, the link between marginality and turnout is unaffected by how much constituencies are changed in redistricting, even though few voters in much-changed seats are likely to know for sure just how marginal their new seats are.

So how is the link between competitiveness and turnout maintained? An answer can be found in the activities of agents of political mobilization such as political parties. Mobilization matters: even individuals who, on the basis of a range of objective measures (for instance, their age, education, income, general interest in politics and so on) might on occasion need the extra nudge if being asked by someone else to participate in order to make the final step and do so. We have already encountered this effect in the context of families, friends and perceptions of what is acceptable locally. It also holds for mobilization by political parties.

In plurality systems, mainstream parties tend to focus their local campaign efforts on marginal rather than safe seats, as their goal is to maximise the number of seats they can win, not their national vote share (and hence extra votes piled up in seats where the result is not in question are wasted: Johnston and Pattie, 2006; Pattie et al., 2019). And greater campaign intensity in the marginal seats is associated with higher rates of participation there (Hogan, 1999; Denver et al., 2004; Fisher et al., 2016; Trumm and Sudulich, 2018; Trumm et al., 2017). Non-political get-out-the-vote campaigns also catalyze participation, and being contacted in person is particularly effective: those contacted and encouraged to participate are more likely to do so than those who are not contacted (Green and Gerber, 2006).

Conclusion

The insights offered by the discipline of geography show that place matters for political participation. Accessibility plays a part: the greater the physical barriers to participation, the more likely people are to sit out the opportunity to take part. Some of those physical barriers may be hard to control. But others can be manipulated. The quality of transport links, access to sites of participation (such as polling stations, institutional buildings, and so on) can be manipulated. The human geography of participation matters too, through a range of compositional and contextual effects. And again, some of these can be manipulated to encourage or discourage participation. Changing from plurality to proportional electoral systems, for instance, reduces the incentives for parties to mobilise support in some places but not in others, with predictable, and measurable effects on participation rates.

While geography matters, it is often a relatively small influence on participation. Its effects are often at the margin, and restricted to those who are less motivated to act. Some individuals will engage in political action whatever the geographical situation in which they find themselves. But for others, particularly where the commitment to participate is somewhat lukewarm, the particularities of the places in which they find themselves, and the communities who live there, can be enough to tip the balance between engaging and remaining aloof from action.

But geography is nevertheless inescapable. All forms of political action take place somewhere, and the locations in which it occurs are rarely utterly random and disconnected from the actions taking place there. To understand political participation fully, we need to understand its geography too.

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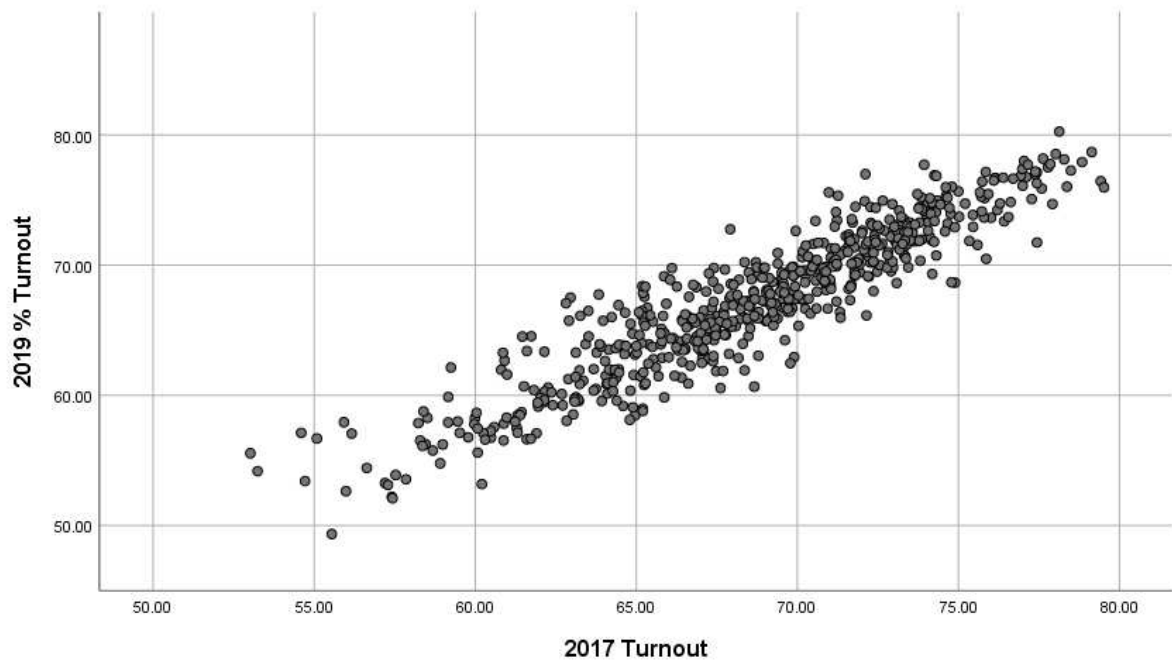
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Figure 1: Constituency turnout at the 2017 and 2019 UK General Elections *



* Constituencies in Northern Ireland and the Speaker's constituency are omitted from the figure.

Table 1: The socio-economic correlates of constituency turnout at the 2019 British general election

Variable	Correlation (r) with % turnout 2019
% employed in professional/managerial occupations: 2011 Census	0.781
% employed in routine occupations: 2011 Census	-0.692
% home owners: 2011 Census	0.462
% renting home: 2011 Census	-0.474
% households with no car: 2011 Census	-0.527
% with degree-level qualifications: 2011 Census	0.638
% with no formal educational qualifications: 2011 Census	-0.694
% aged 65 and over: 2011 Census	0.359
% aged 18-29: 2011 Census	-0.339
% claiming unemployment benefit, September 2019	-0.749