Worldwide parliamentary elections in the 1990s revealed stark contrasts in the percentage of citizens who cast their vote. Turnout in established democracies ranged from over eighty percent in Iceland, Greece, Italy, Belgium and Israel to fewer than one-half the eligible voters in the United States. Indeed, turnout in the United States continues to fall well below the level common in nearly all other affluent postindustrial societies. Policymakers seeking to improve turnout in the United States have often been attracted to institutional reforms, ranging from initiatives like Motor-Voter registration laws to liberalization of postal voting (See Traugott chapter, this volume).

The core question addressed by this chapter is whether institutional reforms can overcome barriers to electoral turnout in the U.S., and in particular whether there is evidence from other countries that institutional changes, legal rules, and voting facilities have a systematic impact on voting participation. Political institutions refer to variables such as party competition, type of electoral system and level of the contest; legal rules determine who is eligible to cast a ballot and voting facilities include such technological factors as proxy or postal ballots, or the ease with which those eligible can in fact register and vote. This chapter analyzes the impact of all these arrangements on turnout. Part I outlines a motivational theory of voting, which assumes that citizens are motivated by the rational tradeoff between the cost of voting, electoral choices and decisiveness of the vote, and then summarizes the results of previous literature of voting. Subsequent parts examine the impact of institutions, rules, and facilities on turnout, measured by the ratios of Vote/Voting Age Population (VAP) in 405 national (parliamentary and presidential) elections held during the 1990s worldwide. The results demonstrate that political institutions do matter. In particular voting participation is likely to be maximized in elections using proportional representation, with small electoral districts, regular but relatively infrequent national contests, competitive party systems, and in chief executive contests. Legal rules also play a role. In contrast, voting facilities are relatively unimportant for turnout. The conclusion summarizes the main findings and considers their implications for the process and prospects of electoral reform in the United States.

FACTORS IN THE VOTE DECISION
Why would institutions be expected to affect turnout? The motivational theory of voting developed in this chapter suggests that the structural context shapes voters’ incentives to participate by influencing electoral costs, electoral choices, and decisiveness of the vote.

Electoral Costs
Electoral costs concern the time, energies and informational demands required to register and cast a ballot. The difficulties of voting can be reduced by making arrangements for voters with special needs. Mail, proxy and absentee ballots, mobile polling facilities for voters who cannot travel, and elections held on holidays or weekends are some ways in which voting can be made more accessible. Registration procedures can be an important hurdle to voting. In many countries registration is the government’s responsibility, conducted via a door-to-door canvas or annual census, so that most eligible citizens are automatically enrolled to vote. In others, such as the United States, France, and Brazil, citizens have to apply to register to vote, often well ahead of the election, and complicated, time-consuming or restrictive practices can depress participation levels. In general, the greater the cost of voting, the lower electoral participation.

**Electoral Choices**

Electoral choices are determined by the options available on the ballot, notably the range of parties and candidates and the policy choices listed for referenda issues. Elections can be classified as competitive, semi-competitive, and controlled contests. The ability of organized opposition parties to contest elections is limited under many authoritarian regimes, where parliamentary assemblies function primarily to legitimize the government. In semi-competitive elections there is a genuine contest for power between major parties but certain opposition groups are legally banned. In contrast, competitive democratic elections let voters choose among two or more parties. In Israel, for example, the May 1999 elections to the 120-member Knesset returned seventeen parties, and no single party won more than 14% of the popular vote. As a rule, the greater the range of choices available on the ballot, the more various segments of the public will find a party, candidate, or referendum option that reflects their viewpoint, and therefore the stronger will be their incentive to vote.

**Electoral Decisiveness**

Yet there may well be a trade-off between electoral choices and electoral decisiveness. A voter may perceive a political benefit from casting a vote that is likely to determine the composition of government and its public policy agenda or the outcome of referenda issues. Decisiveness (see Katz & Gelman, this volume) is enhanced when elections are anticipated to be close. Voters are likely to feel far greater incentive to get to the polls in close elections than in those where the outcome appears to be a foregone conclusion. For example, British election studies of the postwar era have found that the closer the difference in the national share of the vote between the major parties, the greater the level of electoral participation.

The incentives motivating electors to cast a ballot represent a product of electoral costs (in registering and voting), electoral choices (how many parties are listed on the ballot), electoral decisiveness (to what extent votes cast for each party determine the outcome for parliament and government), and perceptions of competitiveness of the election. If voters face restricted options, so that they cannot choose a party that reflects their views, they are less likely to participate. And if casting a ballot expresses support for a party, candidate, or cause, but makes little difference to the composition of government, the marginal value of the vote is reduced, along with incentives for voting.
Although political institutions are often regarded as largely stable phenomena and therefore unable to account for fluctuations in levels of turnout, the way that institutions operate may change significantly over time. Institutional reforms that may affect turnout include expanding the franchise to women and younger voters; abandoning restrictive practices such as poll taxes, property qualifications, and literacy requirements; changing the laws concerning compulsory voting; increasing the frequency of elections; the use of referendums; and changing patterns of party competition, for example, the rise of the Greens and the collapse of some Communist parties in Europe. Case studies within particular countries can provide important insights into the impact of these developments. Major constitutional reforms during the 1990s provide ‘before’ and ‘after’ natural experiments monitoring the impact of institutional changes on levels of electoral turnout.

What remains unclear from previous studies is the relative importance that citizens give to electoral costs, electoral choices, and electoral decisiveness in weighing the decision to participate. It may be, for example, that elections can be very costly (for example if there are several complex referenda issues on the ballot that create high information hurdles), but citizens may nevertheless participate if they expect their votes to be decisive (such as in close contests or those that are important to voters’ interests). Moreover, the link between the broader institutional context and how voters perceive and weigh the costs, choices, and decisiveness of elections is poorly understood. Individuals’ motivation can also be influenced by many other factors such as mobilization efforts by particular groups; political attitudes, such as a sense of political efficacy; trust in government; civic duty and interest in current affairs; and voters’ education and income. Nevertheless the institutional context can be expected to play an important role in structuring voter’s choices and we can test the evidence for these claims.

**INSTITUTIONAL MODELS EXPLAINING TURNOUT**

To examine the impact of political institutions on turnout. Here we report a series of predictive multivariate models that use ordinary least squares regression analysis to examine the impact of political institution on turnout. The dependent variable in each is turnout, measured by the ratio of turnout to voting age population (Vote/VAP) in 405 national, parliamentary, and presidential elections held during the 1990s in all the countries worldwide where there are consistent indicators.

Model A in Table 1 examines the impact of modernization without any institutional factors to explain vote as a proportion of voting age population. Model A includes levels of “human development” (using the UNDP human development index combining longevity, education, literacy and per capita GDP) and levels of “democratization” (gauged by the Freedom House Gastil Index of political rights and civil liberties). These two factors alone explain 18% of the variance in turnout.
Model B then adds two sets of factors: the main political institutions and the legal rules commonly thought to influence voter participation, (for reasons discussed in detail later). The institutional factors include type of electoral system, size of electoral districts, frequency of national elections, whether the contest was presidential or parliamentary, and the type of party system. Model B also tests for the impact of legal rules determining the eligibility to vote, including the use of compulsory voting, the age at which citizens are eligible to vote, the length of time that women have been enfranchised, and the use of any literacy requirements. After including these structural factors, the overall level of variance explained by the model (shown by the $R^2$ statistics) rises from 18% to 29% This suggests that the factors included in Model B improve the goodness-of-fit, although considerable variance remains to be explained. Let us consider these results in terms of each of the structural factors that can be expected to influence turnout.

[Table 1 about here]

**Electoral Systems**

The seminal work of Maurice Duverger (1954) and Douglas Rae (1971) classified the main types of electoral systems and sought to analyze their consequences. Systems vary according to a number of key dimensions including district size, ballot structures, effective thresholds, malapportionment, assembly size, and the use of open or closed lists. The most important variations concern electoral formulas that determine how votes are counted to allocate seats. There are four main types: majoritarian formulas (including second ballot, preferential ballot and alternative voting systems); plurality formulas (e.g. First-Past-the-Post); semi-proportional systems (such as the cumulative vote and the limited vote explain); and proportional representation (PR) (including open and closed party lists using largest remainders and highest averages formula, the single transferable vote, and mixed member proportional systems).

[NOTE THESE ARE TECHNICAL TERMS BUT IT WOULD TAKE A LONG TIME TO EXPLAIN ALL THESE SYSTEMS TO THOSE WHO ARE UNFAMILIAR WITH THEM. INSTEAD I’VE REFERRED THEM TO A STANDARD SOURCE. OK?]

Previous studies have found that the type of electoral formula affects participation, with proportional representation systems generating higher voter participation than majoritarian or plurality elections. This pattern seems supported by the evidence in established democracies, although the exact reasons for this relationship remain unclear. Motivational explanations focus on the differential incentives facing citizens under alternative electoral arrangements. Under majoritarian systems, such as First-Past-the-Post used for the House of Commons in the United States Congress, Westminster, [and states employing the unit rule for votes in the electoral college], supporters of minor and fringe parties like the Greens, whose geographic support is dispersed widely but thinly across the country, may feel that casting their votes will make no difference to who wins in their constituency, still less to the overall composition of government and the policy agenda. The ‘wasted votes’ argument is strongest in “safe seats” those where the incumbent party is unlikely to be defeated. In contrast, PR elections with low vote thresholds and large district magnitudes, such as the nation-wide party list system used in the Netherlands, increase the opportunities for minor parties with dispersed support to enter parliament even with a relatively modest share of the vote, and therefore increase the incentives to participate. This proposition can be tested by classifying national elections around the world into three categories:
PR, semi-PR, and plurality-majoritarian electoral systems. Table 1 shows that, even after controlling for levels of development, the basic type of electoral system is a significant indicator of turnout, with PR systems generating about 10% higher levels of voting participation than plurality-majoritarian systems.

**Electoral Districts**

District size, and in particular the population of the average electoral district, can be especially important, since this may determine the linkages between voters and their representatives. A relationship between the size of a country and the stability of democracy has long been suspected, although the reasons for this association remain unclear. It is possible that the smaller the number of electors per member of government, the greater the potential for elected representatives to maintain communications with local constituents, and therefore the higher the incentive to turnout based on any ‘personal’ vote. Voters may not be able to shape the outcome for government, but in smaller single-member or multi-member districts they may have greater information, familiarity and contact with their elected representative or representatives, and therefore they may be more interested in affecting who gets elected. Representatives of small homogeneous districts may also find it easier to support constituent interests while representatives of large diverse districts must balance many interests (see Madison, Federalist #10). The simplest way to measure the effect of district size on turnout is to divide the number of seats in the lower house of the legislature into the total population in each country. The results in Table 1 confirm that the size of electoral districts measured in this way were a significant negative predictor of turnout: smaller districts were generally associated with higher voter participation.

**Frequency of Contests**

The frequency of elections has also been thought important for participation, because it increases the costs facing electors and may produce voting fatigue (See Krosnick et al, this volume). Franklin et al. have demonstrated that the closer national elections were in time before direct elections to the European parliament the lower was the turnout in the European elections. The cases of Switzerland and the United States are commonly cited as exemplifying nations with frequent elections for office at multiple levels, as well as widespread use of referenda and initiatives, and both are characterized by exceptionally low voter participation among Western democracies. California, for example, has primary and general elections for local, county, and state government, including for judicial, mayoral, and gubernatorial offices; Congressional midterm elections every two years for the House and Senate; Presidential elections every four years; as well as multiple referenda issues on the ballot all producing what Anthony King has termed the “never-ending election campaign”. If the frequency of elections generates voter fatigue, then the increase in primary contests in the United States after 1968, the introduction of direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, and contests for regional bodies following devolution and decentralization in countries like Spain, France, and the UK, could help to explain their declines in turnout in recent decades. A simple measure of electoral frequency can be calculated by the number of parliamentary and presidential elections held during the
decade of the 1990s, ranging from only one contest in a few semi-democracies up to seven or more elections in the United States, Ecuador and Taiwan. Although not definitive, the results in Table 1 confirm that the frequency of national elections was highly and negatively significant: the more often national elections are held, the greater the voter fatigue. This result could provide important clues to some of the sharpest outliers in turnout, such as Switzerland and the United States, both some of the richest and most developed countries on earth, with highly-educated populations and a substantial middle class, yet characterized by relatively low (and falling) levels of voter participation.

**Party Systems and Electoral Competition**

The type of party system and the levels of electoral competition are likely to be closely related to the basic type of electoral system, although the fit is not perfect. Ever since Duverger (1954) it has been well known that the plurality method of elections favors two-party systems by systematically over-representing the largest party when translating votes into seats. Lijphart’s (1999) comparison of 36 established democracies demonstrates that as disproportionality rises, the effective number of parliamentary parties falls. Yet there are a number of important exceptions to this rule, with plural societies such as Papua New Guinea and India characterized by multiple parties in majoritarian electoral systems, as well as Malta and Austria with two-party and two-and-a-half party systems despite PR elections.

In addition to party system arrangements, the very closeness of the vote in a particular election may increase citizens’ incentives to participate and parties’ incentives to mobilize supporters to get them to the polls. Patterns of electoral competition can therefore be expected to influence voter turnout, but there is little agreement in the literature about the exact nature of this relationship, or how best to gauge competition. Some suggest that the greater the range of alternative parties listed on the ballot, from the nationalist far right to the post-Communist left, the more people are stimulated to vote. This claim assumes that wider electoral choices across the ideological spectrum mean that all social groups are more likely to find a party to represent their views, preferences and interests. Yet the counter argument is also heard from those who suggest that the higher the level of party fragmentation, the higher the probability of coalition government, the less the share of votes cast determines the formation of government, and therefore the lower the inducement for electors to turn out. As Jackman (1987) has argued, voters in multiparty systems that produce coalitions do not directly choose the government that will govern them; instead they vote for the parties that select the government that determines the policy agenda. Under multiparty coalitions voters appear to have a more decisive choice among policies, whereas in fact they have a less decisive one.

The most important proposition based on the motivational theory already discussed is that under conditions of free and fair elections, all other things being equal, we would expect to find a curvilinear relationship between the effective number of electoral parties and levels of voting turnout. More parties standing for office simultaneously increases electoral choice, but also decreases electoral decisiveness. The share of the national vote for the strongest party in first place provides a simple and effective summary indicator of electoral competitiveness. In highly
fragmented party systems the strongest parliamentary party in each election commonly wins less than a third of the popular vote. In contrast, predominant one-party systems characteristically have the winning party with vote shares of 60% or more.

Table 1 confirms that both predominant one-party systems and fragmented multi-party systems are characterized by lower than average levels of turnout, although in the multivariate models the difference was only significant at the relatively weak .10 level. Turnout rises steadily with a more evenly-balanced vote share, before dropping again in cases where the winning party got 30% or less of the vote, indicating a highly fragmented multiparty system and coalition government.

In contrast, participation is likely to be higher in elections with more competitive party systems. Two-party systems vying for power in unitary parliamentary government usually produce a decisive electoral outcome and regular rotation of government and opposition parties in power. Where two fairly evenly-divided major parties compete for marginal seats, the ‘winners’ bonus’ or ‘manufactured majority’ characteristic of majoritarian and plurality electoral systems means that a modest tremor in the popular vote can trigger a dramatic shift in parliamentary seats. In such systems, like a finely balanced mechanism, even a small swing in electoral support may change the party that forms the government. Two-party systems usually offer voters clear and simple choices between two alternative sets of public policies, and this pattern of competition also forces parties to maintain their core base and to compete for the ‘swing’ or median voter in the center ground. Moderate multiparty systems, typified by Germany or Norway, are characterized by more than two and less than five or six parliamentary parties. This pattern of competition provides voters with a range of electoral choices. However, these systems also simultaneously decrease the decisiveness of the electoral result and the salience of casting a ballot, because the outcome is more likely to produce coalition governments that rest upon negotiations among parties rather than on the share of the vote and allocation of seats.

**Presidential vs. Parliamentary Executives**

Another constitutional factor commonly believed to influence the motivational incentives to turnout concerns the power of the office and, in particular, whether there is a parliamentary or presidential system of government. *First-order elections* are the most important national contests, including legislative elections in countries with parliamentary systems of government and presidential contests in countries with strong presidencies. *Second-order* elections are all others, including state, provincial or local contests, referenda and initiatives, and direct elections to the European Parliament among the fifteen-member EU states. In a parliamentary system, the head of government - such as the prime minister, premier, or chancellor – is selected by the legislature and can be dismissed by a legislative vote of no confidence. [QUERY: WHY NOT USE ‘PRESIDENTIAL AND ‘LEGISLATIVE.’? TAKE OUT: THIS JARGON NOT HELPFUL OR USED AGAIN. NOT QUITE CLEAR ABOUT THE PROBLEM HERE. ONE CAN USE ‘LEGISLATIVE’ OR ‘PARLIAMENTARY’ EQUALLY BUT OVERALL PARLIAMENTARY IS THE NORMAL TERM MOST COMMONLY USED OUTSIDE THE US (EG THE ipu). LEGISLATIVE CAN ALSO REFER TO LOWER LEVELS NOT
INCLUDED IN THIS COMPARISON. ] In a presidential system the head of government is popularly elected for a fixed term and is not dependent on the legislature for tenure in office. In countries with presidential systems of government where elections for the president and legislature are held on separate occasions, such as the mid-term elections in the United States, more people are likely to participate in executive contests. Where Presidential and legislative elections are held on the same date, there is likely to be no substantial difference in levels of turnout in both types of contest. The result of the analysis presented in Table 1 confirms that, overall, presidential elections produced significantly greater turnout than legislative contests.

**THE IMPACT OF LEGAL RULES**

Direct arrangements more closely related to legal eligibility include restrictions of the franchise based on age, gender, and literacy tests, along with the use of compulsory voting laws.

**Eligibility for the Franchise**

The minimum age at which people qualify to vote is important since in most West European countries for which we have survey data, the young are consistently less likely to vote than older groups, and similar patterns are well-established in the United States.(See Traugott, this volume)\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ceteris paribus}, we would find that the lower the ages at which citizens are eligible to vote, the lower the turnout. Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) confirmed that turnout is reduced by almost two points when the voting age is lowered by one year.\textsuperscript{27} Latin American states were the first to lower the age of the franchise from twenty-one to eighteen, beginning in the nineteenth century; it was only in the 1970s that the United States and west European countries followed suit.\textsuperscript{28} This remains an important issue given that some countries are discussing lowering the age of suffrage. Yet the results of the analysis in Table 1 show that today the age of voting eligibility was not significantly related to turnout, probably because most countries have now standardized to within a relatively similar age bracket.

Restrictions on the franchise vary from one country to another, such as the disenfranchisement of felons, bankrupts, resident aliens, and groups like the mentally incapacitated.\textsuperscript{29} Waves of immigration or increases in the prison population can have an important dampening effect on vote/VAP. In the United States the claim of steadily declining turnout since 1972 has been challenged as an artifact of an increase in the size of the voting age population by those ineligible to vote.\textsuperscript{30} One of the most important restrictions concerns the use of literacy requirements to qualify to vote, abolished in the U.S. in 1965, which served mainly to disenfranchise less educated and ethnic minority groups.\textsuperscript{31} Where these requirements were enforced, they would have depressed the number of eligible voters, and the abolition of these requirements should have served to boost Vote/VAP. Table 1 confirms that turnout is significantly lower among the few countries that still employ this practice.

The enfranchisement of women has had a dramatic impact on electoral participation. Only four countries enfranchised women before the start of World War I. But women had attained the suffrage by the end of World War II in 83 nations, and in 171 nations in total by 1970. However
women today continue to be barred from voting in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. 32 The first election after women’s enfranchisement has usually seen a sudden drop in levels of Vote/VAP, as women suddenly become eligible to vote, followed by a slow recovery in rates of turnout. In the United States and Britain women were first enfranchised in the early 1920s, and the first election afterwards saw an immediate sharp drop in overall turnout. Subsequent decades saw a slow and steady increase in levels of female turnout until the early 1980s, when women came to participate at similar, or even slightly higher, levels than men. Similar patterns have been found elsewhere.33 The residual effect of this pattern is found more widely; countries that enfranchised women prior to 1945 had average turnout (vote/VAP) of 69% in the 1990s, compared with 61% for countries that granted women the vote in the post-war era. In the multivariate model in Table 1 the difference proves to be strong and significant; countries that enfranchised women earlier tend to have higher turnout today than those that reformed in more recent decades. The enfranchisement of women brings groups into the electorate who have never acquired the habit of voting from an early age. Due to the process of generational turnover, as younger women gradually replace older women, this disparity gradually fades over time.

Compulsory Voting

Compulsory or mandatory voting laws would seem to have an obvious impact on turnout, although the strength of the effect depends upon how strictly such regulations and any associated sanctions are implemented and enforced.34 In practice, legal rules for voting may be de jure or de facto. The most common legal basis is statutory law although the obligation to vote may also be rooted in constitutional provisions.35 Implementation ranges from minimal de facto enforcement to the imposition of various sanctions. Fines are most common, although other punishments include the denial of official documents such as passports, identity cards, drivers licenses or government benefits and even occasionally the threat of imprisonment for a criminal offense. The effectiveness of any legal penalties depend on the efficiency of the prior registration process and, where the initiative falls upon the elector, whether fines or other penalties are associated with failure to register. Where implementation is loosely enforced, the impact of any mandatory regulations has to operate largely through the impact of the law on social norms, similar to the effect of no-parking restrictions on city streets.

Mandatory voting regulations may be genuine attempts to increase public involvement in the political process, or they may be employed by less democratic regimes to compel the public to vote, hoping to legitimize one-party contests. Even in democratic states the use of legal regulations may have unintended consequences for participation, since they may reduce the incentive for parties to organize and mobilize their heartland supporters to get them to the polls.36

Previous studies have found that compulsory voting is associated with higher turnout, but these have been limited mainly to established democracies, most of which are in Western Europe. Where these laws exist in established democracies, the registered electorate, the group most obviously subject to any sanctions, is far more likely to cast a ballot. Yet in all other types of political systems the result is very different with vote/VAP actually slightly lower among newer democracies and semi-democracies with mandatory laws, and far lower in Egypt and Singapore,
the only two non-democratic states with mandatory regulations and somewhat competitive elections. Table 1 comparing use of compulsory voting in all countries (not just older democracies) shows that this has no significant impact on voting turnout.

What explains this finding? One, the law may be enforced more strictly, and the registration processes may be more efficient in the older democracies, so that voters face stronger negative incentives to participate. Two, the impact of mandatory laws may depend primarily on broader social norms about obeying the law and those in authority, which may prove stronger in established democratic states in Western Europe than in many Latin American cultures. Three, it is possible that newer democracies characterized by low electoral turnout are more likely to introduce laws in the attempt to mobilize the public, but that without strict implementation these laws prove to be ineffective correctives. Four, the penalties facing voters vary in terms of the level of any fine (from three Swiss francs up to 3,000 schillings in Austria), the possibility of imprisonment for failure to pay the fine, potential disenfranchisement (in Belgium and Singapore), and other sanctions (such as the difficulties Greek non-voters face in getting a new driver’s license or passport)37. We cannot establish the relative importance of each of these reasons, but they may help to account for some of the striking differences in the impact of compulsory voting laws in different types of political systems, and suggest the need for caution in generalizing from how these laws work in established democracies to other nations.

**The Impact of Voting Facilities**

Turnout may also be affected by the administration of registration procedures and facilities for voting that alter the costs for certain groups. Absentee, advance, overseas, and postal ballots; proxy votes; mobile polling facilities for special populations like the institutionalized elderly, infirm or disabled; and polling scheduled for weekend or holidays rather than workdays, increase the administrative burden of electoral regimes.38

**Registration Processes**

The facilities for registration and casting a ballot are commonly expected to affect turnout. Evidence that the registration process matters is most persuasive when comparing variation in regulations from state to state within the United States. Rosenstone and Wolfinger (1980) examined the difference in turnout between those states with the easiest registration requirements, for example those that allow election day registration at polling places and those with the strictest requirements. Their estimates suggest that if all American states had same-day registration, this would provide a one-time boost of turnout by about 5 to 9 percent.39 Since their study in the 1970s, many states have experimented with easing the requirements through initiatives like the ‘Motor Voter’ registration (where citizens can register to vote while registering their cars), although with limited effects on American voter participation (See Traugott chapter)40. Some states have also experimented with postal voting. The 1993 National Voter Registration Act requires all states to make voter registration available in motor vehicle bureaus, by mail, and it also forbids removing citizens from the rolls simply for not voting. Nevertheless as Florida vividly illustrated in the 2000 presidential contest, the efficiency of the registration and voting procedure at state levels can leave much to be desired. Studies suggest
that easing voter registration processes has slightly improved American voter turnout, with a one-time bump when new processes are introduced, but that the impact is not uniform across the whole electorate. It has had the most impact increasing participation among middle-class citizens.41

The comparative evidence is less well established. Studies have long assumed that voluntary registration procedures, where citizens need to apply to be eligible to vote, are an important reason why American turnout lags well behind many comparable democracies.42 In countries with application processes, prospective voters must usually identify themselves before an election, sometimes many weeks in advance, by registering with a government agency. In other countries the state takes the initiative in registering eligible citizens through an annual census or similar mechanism. But what is the impact of this process? Katz (1997) compared the electoral regulations in thirty-one nations and found that nineteen states used an automatic registration process, while in contrast twelve registered citizens by application.43 The analysis of electoral participation based on this classification of countries suggests that the registration hurdles may be less important than is often assumed, since average vote/VAP proved to be identical in both types of system.44 Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the use of automatic or voluntary registration procedures seems unrelated to levels of turnout within the universe of established democracies.

Polling facilities

In terms of other voting facilities, most countries hold their elections on a single day, usually on the weekend, making it easier for employed people to vote. In some places, however, elections are spread over more than one day. India, for example, has more than 600 million voters and some 800 thousand polling stations, so balloting takes place on a staggered basis during a month across the whole country. Different countries treat absentee, overseas, postal, advance ballots, proxy voting, and polling station distribution differently.45 Franklin (2002) compared average turnout in parliamentary elections in 29 countries from 1960-1995 and found that compulsory voting, Sunday voting, and postal voting facilities all proved important predictors, along with the proportionality of the electoral system, but that the number of days that polls were open did not.46 A broader comparison of 25 older democracies where information about voting facilities is available found that only voting on a rest day provided a significant boost to turnout in established democracies; in contrast the use of proxy voting (where the act of casting a ballot was legally delegated to someone else like a spouse, parent or friend) and the number of days that the polling stations were open were negatively associated with voter turnout, perhaps because countries concerned about low turnout are the ones who try to increase the opportunities to get to the polls47. Other special voting facilities all proved to be unrelated to turnout. Overall a comparison of older democracies found that voting facilities explained far less variance in electoral participation than the role of institutions and legal rules.

Nevertheless despite this pattern, other evidence from recent experimental pilot schemes suggests that lowering the barriers to participation may have a more positive effect than the cross-national comparison indicates. Pilots trying Internet remote e-voting include the Arizona Democratic primary election48 and local elections in Geneva49. One of the most innovative experiments was conducted by the UK government when they introduced easier voting facilities
in selected pilot wards during the May 2002 local elections. The pilots used a variety of methods including casting a vote by post, by mobile phone text messaging, by the Internet at remote home/office sites, local libraries and information kiosks, by digital television, as well as extending the opening hours for polling stations and using early voting. The results remain under review by the Electoral Commission but preliminary comparisons appear to show a dramatic increase in turnout in wards using all-postal ballots, almost doubling levels of participation in some places. The evidence remains under review, as the changes could be the result of a ‘Hawthorn’ effect, if voters and parties change their behavior in the light of the experiments, and some security concerns remain in certain wards. The difference between the cross-national evidence and the British results could also be due to the particular way in which postal voting is implemented, for example the ease or difficulty of registering and voting by mail, and in particular whether postal votes are automatically issued to all electors or whether they are only available for certain restricted categories, like the disabled or those living overseas. Nevertheless innovative pilot schemes exemplified by those in Britain appear to be a promising way to evaluate the public’s response to alternative voting facilities in the context of real elections and more should be attempted to evaluate alternative proposals.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary incentives facing citizens in national elections may be understood as a product of the electoral costs of registering and voting, the party choices available to electors, and the impact of the vote on government composition. The costs include the time and effort required to register and to vote, any legal sanctions imposed for failure to turn out, and the frequency with which electors are expected to vote. Among affluent societies we expect turnout to be higher in political systems with lower voting costs, such as those with automatic processes for maintaining the electoral register and electoral arrangements that maximize party competition.

The main findings in this chapter can be summarized as follows:

1. In multivariate models predicting turnout in national elections around the world during the 1990s, after controlling for levels of human and political development, political institutions and legal rules were strongly and significantly associated with voter participation.

2. In the worldwide comparison, among the political institutions that matter, voting participation is likely to be maximized in elections that employ any of the following - proportional representation, small electoral districts, regular but relatively infrequent national contests, competitive party systems, and elections for the chief executive.

3. In terms of the legal rules, the worldwide comparison showed that voter participation was lower in countries that had enfranchised women more recently and which employed literacy requirements, although the age of voting eligibility and the use of compulsory voting made no significant difference to turnout.

4. When the comparison is limited to established democracies, the evidence shows that the combination of political institutions and legal rules influence turnout more strongly than specific voting facilities, such as registration processes, transfer voting, or advance voting, which all proved insignificant.

5. In national elections held in established democracies, the use of compulsory voting regulations was an important indicator of higher turnout, whereas this was not found
in the broader comparison of elections worldwide. Although it cannot be proved here, the reasons for this difference probably concern the efficiency of the implementation process of the registration system, sanctions for non-voting, and cultural traditions concerning obeying the law.

The implications for the United States are that many of its basic institutional arrangements act to depress electoral participation. Voting participation is usually lower in countries using majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral systems, in districts with large electorates like the Senate and House, and in nations where there are frequent contests producing voter fatigue, all of which characterize the American political system. This suggests that some of its most important reforms, such as the introduction of party primaries—have had the opposite effect on turnout to that intended. In established democracies, the use of compulsory voting is an effective tool for boosting participation. (See Hasen, this volume) The two-party system in America also limits voter’s ability to express their preferences at the ballot box. Yet among all the reforms that are currently under debate, none of the basic institutional arrangements shown to make a difference are under serious consideration. Instead most attention has focused on reforms to specific voting facilities that are unlikely to prove an effective remedy. (See Traugott, this volume) The problem is not that postwar turnout has declined significantly in the United States, as many popular accounts falsely claim, but rather that postwar American turnout has always been lower than nearly all comparable postindustrial societies. This systemic pattern is unlikely to alter as a result of tinkering with modest reforms although, at the same time, whether persistently low turnout should be a cause for concern in America remains a matter worthy of serious debate.
Table 1: Explaining Turnout in National Elections, all countries in the 1990s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model A: Socioeconomic Development</th>
<th>Model B: Development plus Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b (s.e.) St. Beta Sig.</td>
<td>b (s.e.) St. Beta Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>45.67 (5.82) ***</td>
<td>76.77 (12.64) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Development</td>
<td>0.03 (.01) .31 ***</td>
<td>0.02 (.01) .19 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Democratization</td>
<td>0.95 (.33) .16 **</td>
<td>0.84 (.33) .14 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral System</td>
<td>2.65 (1.02) .13 **</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean population per MP</td>
<td>-.001 (.00) -.09 *</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of national elections</td>
<td>-3.47 (.56) -.34 ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominant party system</td>
<td>-3.98 (2.47) -.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1=yes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragmented party system</td>
<td>-6.23 (3.76) -.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1=yes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential (1) or Legislative (0) contests</td>
<td>4.54 (1.77) .11 **</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEGAL RULES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of voting eligibility</td>
<td>-.99 (.62) -.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of women’s</td>
<td>.19 (.052) .19 ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enfranchisement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of compulsory voting</td>
<td>1.96 (2.11) .04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy requirements</td>
<td>- (6.17) -.15 ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of elections</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R2</td>
<td>.182 (16.7)</td>
<td>.294 (15.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes:

Vote/VAP is measured as the number of valid votes as a proportion of the Voting Age Population in 405 parliamentary and presidential national elections held in 139 nations during the 1990s. The figures represent unstandardized regression coefficients (b), standard errors, standardized beta coefficients, and significance, with mean vote/VAP as the dependent variable. * = p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001


Electoral system: Coded as Majoritarian/plurality (1), Semi-proportional (2), and Proportional Representation (3).

Party System: Predominant Party Systems are defined as those where the party in 1st place gets 60% of the vote or more. Fragmented party system where the party in 1st place gets 30% of the vote or less.

Compulsory Voting: The following 23 nations were classified as currently using compulsory voting: Australia, Belgium, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Liechtenstein, Panama Canal Zone, Thailand, and Uruguay, Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, and Venezuela, Singapore and Egypt.

Source: Calculated from International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) database Voter Turnout since 1945, www.idea.int.
1 It should be noted that this chapter is drawn from a larger comparative project: Pippa Norris. 2002. *Democratic Phoenix: Political Activism Worldwide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2 It should be noted that when comparable models in Table 1 were run with Vote as a proportion of the Registered Electorate (Vote/Reg) as the dependent variable, no substantial differences were found to the results, suggesting that this is not simply a matter of the selected measure used for analysis.


For a discussion about this in the context of Britain and the United States, see Bruce Cain, John Ferejohn and Morris Fiorina. 1987. The Personal Vote. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

See, for example, the discussion of role orientations of MEPs and MPs in different electoral systems in Richard S. Katz. 1999. ‘Role orientations in Parliament.’ In The European Parliament, the National Parliaments, and European Integration. Eds. Richard S. Katz and Bernhard Wessels. Oxford: Oxford University Press.


I am most grateful help received in identifying the countries that use compulsory voting from Gillian Evans, Lisa Hill, Marian Sawer, Ian McAllister, and Wolfgang Hirczy.


The mean Vote/VAP in the 1990s was the same (72%) in the countries classified by Katz as using automatic and those using application registration procedures, and the mean Vote/Reg in the 1990s was slightly higher (78.1%) in countries with application procedures than in those with automatic processes (75.1%).

The best discussion of the administrative arrangements for registration and balloting found around the world can be found at [www.ACE.org](http://www.ACE.org) developed by International IDEA and IFES. For further details see Michael Maley. 2000. ‘Absentee Voting.’ In *The International Encyclopedia of Elections.* Ed. Richard Rose. Washington DC: CQ Press. See also entries by Andre Blais and Louis Massicotte. ‘Day of Election’;


