

**JOINT VTAC AND REPCONG DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES:
PANEL AT THE ECPR GENERAL CONFERENCE**

General Conference European Consortium for Political Research, Reykjavik, 25-27 August 2011

Description of the activity

We organized a panel at the General Conference of the European Consortium for Political Research to present the main results of two collaborative research projects funded by the HumVIB program of the European Science Foundation: the project “Voter Turnout and Abstention in Context”, and the project “Representation in Europe: Policy Congruence between Citizens and Elites”.

The panel had the aim of presenting some of the main results of both projects, exploring the intersection of the topics of voter turnout and congruence, and discussing the relevance of each project’s findings for the other project.

The panel “Voter turnout and political representation” took place on the 26th of August in Reykjavik, with the following participants:

- Chair: Eva Anduiza
- Discussant 1: Andre Blais
- Discussant 2: Georg Lutz

- Paper 1: Policy congruence and abstention in European democracies, Zoe Lefkofridi (zoe.lefkofridi@univie.ac.at), Aina Gallego (gallego@stanford.edu), Nathalie Giger (Nathalie.Giger@mzes.uni-mannheim.de)

- Paper 2: Party representation and the influence of turnout: Do parties represent voters or citizens? Julian Bernauer (julian.bernauer@uni-konstanz.de), Jan Rosset (jan.rosset@fors.unil.ch), Nathalie Giger (Nathalie.Giger@mzes.uni-mannheim.de)

- Paper 3: The political preferences of political elites, voters and non-voters in Europe, Kathrin Kissau (kathrin.kissau@fors.unil.ch), Georg Lutz (Georg.Lutz@fors.unil.ch)

- Paper 4: Is Compulsory Voting a Remedy? Evidence from the 2001 Polish Parliamentary Elections, Mikolaj Czesnik (mczesnik@isppan.waw.pl)

Approximately 25 persons attended the panel as audience.

The event was successful because, as planned, it provided an opportunity to reflect on each project’s findings, to discuss the broader implications, and to discuss future avenues of research. The papers fitted the topic of the panel well, with multiple complementarities between them. One of the papers (Lefkofridi, Gallego, and Giger) was a collaboration between members of the VTAC and the REPCONG projects. The paper by Bernauer, Rosset, and Giger examined if political representatives are more congruent with the left-right position of voters than non-voters. And the paper by Kissau and Lutz analysed how similar or different are the policy opinions of members of the European Parliament, voters, and non-voters. Czesnik examined the consequences of compulsory voting for representation. Thus, all papers

addressed different aspects of the same problem, which is that in democracies politicians do not have incentives to represent the interests and political preferences of non-voters.

The interest of the public in the topic was demonstrated by both the large audience and by the celebration of a lively debate after the presentations.

Academic Impact

The academic impact of this event can be evaluated along two dimensions:

- a) Dissemination of some of the main results of the project: The panel was an opportunity to disseminate some of the main findings of the project to the political science community. The ECPR biannual general conference is the largest scientific event for European political scientists. Holding this panel gave visibility to both the Hum VIB EUROCORES programme from the ESF, the VTAC and the REPCONG projects and allowed to make public conclusions of the research. Recent studies in the USA, and most notably Larry Bartel's work, have highlighted the biases in the representation process which excludes the political opinions of low status citizens and non-voters. This panel presented results of European projects showing similar evidence across European democracies. First, the papers by Bernauer, Rosset, and Giger, and Kissau and Lutz spoke to this question by demonstrating the deficient political representation of low-status citizens and non-voters. The paper by Lefkofridi, Gallego, and Giger posed the question the other way around and showed that a lack of adequate representation can be a cause of non-voting, and that the relative impact of this cause of non-voting is stronger in some contexts (more proportional systems) than in others (more disproportional systems). The panel thus provided an opportunity to disseminate results of the last three years on an important topic for democracy.
- b) Dialogue across projects: As should be clear from the previous discussion, there is an intense need for dialogue in the fields of turnout and representation. While one project looked at the causes of turnout, and proposed lack of congruence as one of the causes why people do not vote, the other project proposed the exact different direction of causation: that it is non-voting by some groups what causes their lack of representation. Bidirectional causation is ubiquitous in the social sciences and it is entirely plausible that both theories are true. If this is the case, the implication of the joint results of the panel is that there may be a vicious circle in which increases levels of abstention (and we know that in many countries voter turnout is declining) produce a more deficient representation of some population groups (in particular low status citizens) which in turn produces even more abstention among these groups. In this sense, the panel allowed seeing a larger picture of this normatively important phenomenon, which was achieved by dialogue and discussion between different areas of research. While as in its current form, this work cannot establish the direction of causality in an undisputed way, discussing the results made clear that this is the most important unsolved question that future projects should look at. Before this projects we didn't know if there was a link between representation and participation with empirical data for European countries. The papers agreed that the link exists, and the panel was useful to discuss what future inquiries should look at. In particular, there

was a discussion on ways to use experimental methods to untangle the direction of causation. These insights are clearly facilitated by the opportunity to discuss with other researchers in a panel.

In sum, the panel allowed both disseminating results and thinking about the bigger picture that the results spoke to in a new way, which highlighted both what we know now, and where do we need to go to address unsolved issues of causality.

List of panel participants

Unfortunately, two of the original panel participants, Aina Gallego and Delia Dumitrescu, could not attend the ECPR general conference finally. This fact reduced the total expenditure since in their travel expenses were foreseen in the original budget.

Voter turnout and abstention in context (VTAC)

- Eva Anduiza (PI, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona UAB): Panel chair
- André Blais (PI, Université de Montréal): Panel discussant

Representation in Europe: Policy Congruence between Citizens and Elites (REPCONG)

- Georg Lutz (PI, Lausanne University): Paper giver and discussant
- Zoe Lefkofridi (postdoc, University of Vienna): Paper giver
- Nathalie Giger (postdoc, University of Mannheim): Paper giver
- Julian Bernauer (pre-doc, University of Konstanz)
- Jan Rosset (pre-doc, University of Lausanne)
- Kathrin KISSAU (post-doc, University of Lausanne)