

Bernard L. Fraga. *The Turnout Gap: Race, Ethnicity and Political Inequality in a Diversifying America.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xiv, 274 pp. (\$105 cloth, \$26.99 paper).

Bernard Fraga provides a compelling explanation of the gap in voter turnout between white and non-white voters since 1960. This data-rich analysis uses the American National Election Study, the Current Population Survey, and voter files from Catalist to test a theory of electoral influence to explain the turnout gap: simply, the larger the relative size of a racial or ethnic group in a given jurisdiction (county or congressional district), the higher their turnout relative to other groups.

The first chapter provides an overview of the argument. Chapter 2 presents the historical and legal context for turnout and race, starting with the founding of the republic. Chapter 3 examines whether socioeconomic characteristics (income, education, and age) can account for the turnout gap. While differences in SES do account for much of the turnout gap for African Americans, it does not for Latinos and Asian Americans. Furthermore, Fraga points out that even if the gap goes away for African Americans after controlling for SES, the gap is still real. That is, SES is a “post-treatment” characteristic: education and income are partly a “product of the life circumstances an individual finds herself in *as a result of her race*” (p. 69).

Chapter 4 presents the theory of electoral influence and the turnout gap. Fraga builds his theory from three individual-level explanations for the decision to vote: the Downsian calculus of voting, empowerment theory, and elite mobilization. He notes that each theory recognizes the importance of the relative size of an electorally relevant group on the decision to vote. He focuses on this shared factor – the relative size of a racial or ethnic group – to shift attention from “individual-level understandings of who votes into the arena of contextually contingent behaviors” (p. 84). He also notes that his theory is “not designed to *replace* understandings of minority turnout, but rather to synthesize an existing body of research. . .” (p. 83).

The next two chapters provide the evidence to test this theory. The first step is to identify who voted by race and ethnic status. There are two ways to do this – surveys and voter files. The former are well known for overstating the frequency of voting due to a “social desirability bias” (people don’t like admitting they didn’t vote), but can accurately identify the race and ethnic status of respondents through self-reporting. The voter lists are better at accurately determining levels of turnout but less reliable in determining race. Fraga shows that the Catalist voter files underestimate turnout by an average of only .5% from 2006-2016, while the CPS overestimates turnout by as much as 12% in 2006 and 10.8% in 2014 (the CPS errors are smaller in the other four elections, averaging about 2.5%; p.104). On the other hand, Catalist uses a proprietary algorithm to estimate the race and ethnicity of the voters, with an accuracy that Fraga estimates to be “over 90%” (p.105). Given the different strengths and weaknesses of the two approaches, Fraga appropriately reports both types of data. The turnout gap is substantially larger with the

voter file data (between 12 and 20 percent for African Americans, 24 to 28 percent for Latinos, and 25 and 32 percent for Asian Americans from 2006-2016) than the CPS (with virtually no gap for African Americans, 16 to 21 percent for Latinos, and 15 to 19 percent for Asian Americans; see Figure 5.1, p.110).

The second step is to show how turnout varies, given the relative size of the racial and ethnic groups. Chapters 5 and 6 present this evidence at the state, county, and congressional district level. In general, the data support the theory: where the minority population is a larger share of the electorate, turnout is higher. Some of the strongest evidence examines what happens to turnout in congressional districts that are substantially redrawn after redistricting. If the theory is correct, voters who get moved into districts that have a higher percentage of voters from their racial and ethnic groups should vote at a higher rate. This is exactly what happens (but to a lesser extent with Latinos). Fraga demonstrates this with both panel survey data and electoral data with a multivariate GEE model that controls for co-ethnic candidacy and electoral competition.

Chapter 7 examines the question, “Do election policies exacerbate the gap?” Fraga finds that felon disenfranchisement does not explain the gap, while voter ID laws and restrictions on convenience voting had an inconsistent effect with varying impact across states and election years. Fraga advocates for expanding the language provisions of the Voting Rights Act and making voter registration automatic as the most promising election policies to reduce the turnout gap.

As with any research of this magnitude, I have a few quibbles. For example, I was confused by the discussion in Chapter 1 of the *increase* in the turnout gap from 1960-2016 (pp.10-14), because the conventional wisdom is that the turnout gap for African Americans had disappeared in 2008 and 2012. Indeed, analysis elsewhere in the book (pp. 64 and 110) shows the shrinking gap for African Americans and a stable gap for Latinos and Asian Americans elections (although as noted above, Fraga shows that a gap remains in 2008 and 2012 when using the voter file data rather than CPS data). The discrepancy is explained by the focus on total voting age population in Chapter 1 and citizen voting age population elsewhere in the book (the latter is clearly the more appropriate data when discussing turnout in federal elections). While Fraga is generally very careful in presenting his statistical results, there are a few errors, such as the claim that “Nearly every congressional district nationwide had a majority-White population . . .” (p.159). “Nearly every” suggests all but a handful of districts – maybe five to ten. In fact, 122 of the 435 districts are not majority-white (as of 2015; this number would be somewhat higher today).

However, these minor concerns do not detract from this otherwise impressive book. Anyone who is interested in understanding patterns of voter turnout based on race and ethnic status should start with this book.

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