ON THE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF VOTER TURNOUT

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Much of the theoretical literature on voting uses models in which expected pivotality drives voters' turnout decisions and hence determines voting outcomes. It is recognized, however, that such work is at odds with Downs's paradox. In practice, many individuals turn out to vote for reasons unrelated to pivotality, and their votes can overwhelm the forces analyzed in pivotality-based models. Accordingly, we examine a complementary model at the opposite end of the spectrum: one with large *N*, implying that pivotality effects vanish and turnout is driven entirely by individuals' direct costs and benefits of the act of voting itself. We first show that when those costs and benefits are distributed independently of individuals' preferences, turnout is representative, irrespective of the level of turnout. We then identify conditions under which "anything is possible" in the sense that, starting with any given distribution of voter preferences in the underlying population, there can arise any other distribution of preferences in the turnout set. We further characterize how particular skews in terms of representativeness may be generated and show how the introduction of noise in the relationship between underlying preferences and individuals' direct costs and benefits from voting produces, in the limit, fully representative turnout. To illustrate the potential disconnect between representativeness and the level of voter turnout, we present cases in which, as noise increases, the turnout level monotonically falls while representativeness monotonically increases.