

Electoral Systems, Party Mobilization and Turnout: Evidence from the European Parliamentary Elections

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Parties, Electoral Systems and Turnout

Voter turnout is higher in countries with proportional representation (PR) systems than in single member plurality (SMP) systems. Depending on the countries and elections analysed, proportional systems are estimated to have a turnout advantage of 7–9% (Lijphart, 1999; Blais and Carty, 1990; Jackman, 1987). This higher level of turnout under PR is one of the more robust findings in the comparative electoral systems literature. But while scholars agree over what impact PR may have, there is much less certainty over the mechanism that produces such higher turnout. The most likely suspect, in terms of mechanism, is that of party competition and an increased level of party campaigning that occurs in multi-party PR systems. In this article we use survey data from a range of European countries to show that party campaign activity is not the mechanism that produces higher levels of turnout. If anything, campaign activity is higher under systems other than list PR. There are, moreover, predictable differences in campaign activity across different electoral systems. We begin by outlining the argument in favour of the view that turnout is a product of party campaigning.

Turnout and Party Mobilization

In principle, parties should expend greater effort on mobilizing voters when the expected benefits of turning out voters will be greatest, relative to the costs, i.e. when extra votes are likely to turn into extra seats for the party (for a review see Cox, 1999). Therefore, competitive elections and electoral formulas that ensure greater proportionality between seats and votes should increase the efforts parties expend on contacting voters. Because voters respond to the cues they receive from parties about the competitiveness of the election, this process leads to higher turnout. As Denver and Hands (1974: 35) argue: 'Higher turnout in marginal seats is rarely the product of

a "rational" appreciation of the situation by voters, but results from parties creating greater awareness amongst voters or simply cajoling them into going to the polls.'

More competitive elections and a proportional translation of votes to seats assures that PR systems would encourage greater mobilization efforts. Because every vote counts in PR, parties have an incentive to mobilize everywhere, resulting in more competitive elections (Gosnell, 1930; Tingsten, 1937). Plurality systems, by contrast, typically favour a two-party system where only a relatively small number of seats are marginal (Downs, 1957). In SMP systems, parties have a strong incentive to concentrate their resources on marginal or competitive races and neglect those where the outcome is more certain. In those districts that are non-competitive, voters have less of an incentive to vote and parties have less of an incentive to mobilize (Powell, 1980: 12). The greater competitiveness of elections under PR means that more effort should be expended in trying to get voters out to the polls. And it is this effort that is thought to enhance political participation. With fewer competitive races under SMP and fewer parties, the overall level of party campaign activity is expected to be lower and the incentive to vote is diminished. In short, outside of a very few seats, SMP systems are likely *a priori* to be associated with low levels of campaign effort.

Aside from encouraging a higher level of mobilization effort than under SMP, party contacting may be more effective in PR systems. Not only is there likely to be a bigger payoff in terms of extra votes translating in seats, it may take less effort to convert potential voters to actual voters in PR systems. It has long been suggested that PR systems enhance political efficacy because votes are not wasted (Banducci et al., 1999). Greater stores of efficacy may make it easier for parties in PR systems to persuade potential supporters to vote. Additionally, party supporters may be persuaded to turn out to maximize the party's representation in parliament. Even if the party cannot win a majority, every vote can translate into seats that give useful bargaining power over coalition arrangements. By contrast, in plurality systems, parties that are not in a competitive position may find it difficult to persuade potential supporters to go to the polls since their votes may be perceived as making little difference to the outcome. Parties that have little chance of winning but nevertheless attempt to mobilize support for their cause may do so not primarily to influence the outcome but instead to register a protest with the political establishment. Their potential supporters, however, who are likely to be disillusioned with the political process, may be more difficult to mobilize.

No study has yet directly examined whether voters are more likely to be mobilized in multi-party (PR) systems, and instead most studies have taken

a more indirect approach by examining how party systems influence turnout. Although it has been assumed that the number of parties competing for votes leads to an increase in turnout, the empirical evidence is mixed. Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) find, for example, that while increased competitiveness fosters higher turnout, a greater number of parties competing for votes decreases turnout. The overall impact is positive with PR countries having 3% higher turnout (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998: 251), but the negative aspects via multi-partyism can be quite substantial (Jackman, 1987; Jackman and Miller, 1995; Gray and Caul, 2000; but see Ladner and Milner, 1999 for a counter view).

While these previous studies do not directly examine party mobilization, they nevertheless raise doubts that multi-partyism necessarily promotes greater voter mobilization. Although PR systems may appear to provide strong incentives for party mobilization, it is also quite plausible to think that systems with single member districts, where a personal vote is more likely to be cultivated (Carey and Shugart, 1995; Bowler and Farrell, 1993; Bowler, 1996; Mitchell, 2000; Ames, 1995; Samuels, 1999), will foster greater mobilization and party contact. While often over-stated, the role of the personal vote in helping candidates become elected can prompt campaign efforts at the local level (Cain et al., 1987). The importance of 'home style' is buttressed by evidence that constituents are more likely to have contacted representatives in electoral systems with lower district magnitudes (Curtice and Shively, 2000; Bowler and Farrell, 1993). Citizens are also more likely to correctly name their representative in plurality and mixed systems than in pure PR systems (Klingemann and Wessels, 2001).

Therefore, even after controlling for the effects of marginality, plurality systems such as SMP may still be associated with greater campaign effort by candidates since – in general – where voters can choose individual candidates those candidates have incentives to get out the vote regardless of whether the national party is allocating resources to that particular district. Even if a party adopts a national focus to its campaign, local candidates may still think it worthwhile to canvass support for their own campaign rather than sit back and rely on the national campaign to win the seat for them. Thus, while PR may well be associated with higher levels of turnout, the mechanism that produces the turnout may not be that of party activism. Moreover, the impact of party mobilization may be overstated; it is not at all clear how effective parties are in mobilizing voters.

Party Campaign Strategy and Effectiveness

Assessments about what impact party mobilization has on turnout depend not just on how many citizens are reached by parties but also on who is

contacted. There is ample evidence from the US to suggest that the effectiveness of party canvassing is limited because parties tend to contact members of the electorate who are active in politics and thus predisposed to vote (Goldstein and Ridout, 2002; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1992). Nevertheless, parties in the US continue to invest heavily in canvassing efforts and most survey-based studies show that reported contact by a party has a positive impact on turnout even when controlling for an individual's likelihood of voting (Kramer, 1970; Caldeira, Clausen and Patterson, 1990; Goldstein and Ridout, 2002; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1983; Wielhouwer and Lockerbie, 1994). After examining the effect of party contacting from 1952 to 1990, Wielhouwer and Lockerbie (1994: 220) conclude that 'contrary to most of the literature heralding the demise of political parties, their effectiveness in mobilizing voters has increased over the last 40 years', especially in presidential election years. Field experiments in the US beginning with Gosnell (1927) have demonstrated that citizens are more likely to vote when they are contacted. Experimental studies that compare the type of contact made indicate that canvassing (personal contact) is more effective than mail and telephone contacting (see Eldersveld, 1956; Miller, Bositis and Baer, 1981; Gerber and Green, 2000). There is also evidence that canvassing tends to increase turnout among occasional voters but not chronic non-voters (Niven, 2001) and that contacts closer to the election tend to be more effective (Niven, 2002).

Evidence from other countries about party canvassing and turnout is less voluminous in comparison. Some of this literature focuses on turnout, but other studies focus on the impact of local campaigning on a party's share of the vote. Evidence based on a field experiment during local elections in the UK suggests that party canvassing can appreciably increase turnout (Bochel and Denver, 1971, 1972), but others emphasize the relative unimportance of party canvassing when compared to television appeals (McAllister, 1985). Whiteley and Seyd (1994) find that local campaigning efforts had more of an influence on the distribution of votes rather than overall turnout. In an aggregate analysis that measures local campaigning effort as the number of volunteers available, Carty and Eagles (1999) find that opposition candidates benefit the most from local canvassing efforts. In New Zealand, a change in 1996 from SMP (also referred to as first-past-the-post or FPP) to PR led to a shift in party strategies. Rather than focusing their contacting efforts entirely on marginal seats, as they had seemed to do in the past, parties focused their efforts somewhat more broadly in the first election held under the new system, in an attempt to capture the nationwide 'list' vote (Denemark, 1998). In another study, Vowles (2002) reports a decline in party mobilization since New Zealand adopted PR, which he finds contributed to a decline in overall turnout.

Because these individual country studies cannot explicitly test institutional effects, the mechanism linking electoral systems to mobilization efforts is more a matter of conjecture than empirical findings. The evidence based on single country studies, while suggestive, does little to tell us about the relative rates of contacting across various political systems. While we know that turnout is higher under PR than under other systems we do not know why that is so. Indeed, in general, we know very little about either the effects of the electoral system on party mobilization efforts or, at the micro-level, about party attempts to mobilize voters across different systems. We can address this question by looking at evidence across a range of countries.

We have two main hypotheses in relation to the argument that it is party competition and/or mobilization that generates higher turnout under PR. For party mobilization efforts to be the mechanism that produces higher turnout, we must see two patterns. First, proportional systems should be associated with generally higher levels of campaign activity and, second, that campaign activity promotes turnout. It is the first of these steps that is especially critical since, as we saw, a plausible argument may be advanced that candidate based systems – typically the less proportional systems – are likely to produce much more active campaigns. If this latter pattern holds then we can have ruled out party campaigning as the mechanism by which PR produces higher turnout.

Data and Methods

To test these hypotheses, we rely on individual level data measuring citizen contact with political parties and activists across a range of different electoral settings. *Eurobarometer 52* provides a useful source for testing these hypotheses. The survey was conducted in October and November 1999 following the European Parliamentary Elections in June of that year and includes questions that measure whether a citizen was canvassed by a political party, received campaign literature or was exposed to campaign advertisements during the European Parliamentary campaign (see Appendix for question wording). We have two sets of questions to address in our empirical work. First, we assess the impact of electoral system upon party campaigns and party contact with voters. Second, we assess the impact of party contact upon the decision to turn out.

The main independent variables of interest are those relating to electoral system effects. The classification of electoral systems is the subject of a considerable literature within political science (for a comprehensive review see Farrell, 2001; see also Lijphart, 1999; Carey and Shugart, 1995; Bowler, 1996; Bowler and Farrell, 1993; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998). Here we

wish to focus on the (hypothesized) virtues of pure proportional representation and so focus on relatively broad categorizations. If party competition is the main mechanism at work that produces higher turnout, closed list PR should result in higher levels of campaign activity. Britain, France, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain are coded as closed list based on a description of their electoral systems for Euro-elections.¹ It is, of course, possible to argue that given the 'second order' nature of European elections the crucial incentives facing party organization are those associated with national electoral systems. In some models, therefore, we include a measure of national electoral systems. In this case, Britain, France, Ireland and Italy are classified as candidate based, districted systems while the remaining countries are classified as closed list PR.²

While our main hypothesis of interest is that electoral systems will be associated with certain kinds of campaign activity, party campaigns do not exist in isolation but are often subject to contextual factors and it is important to take these into account. For example, exposure to campaign advertisements will depend on campaign regulations within a given country. Using the information in Bowler et al. (2003) allowed us to identify those countries which actually allow paid TV advertisements for political campaigns (Austria, Germany, Italy and Sweden). Whether or not the country was a new democracy or not could also shape overall levels of campaign activity. Here expectations are contradictory: relatively new democracies could see more energized campaigns and parties and therefore generally higher levels of activity independent of electoral system or, alternatively, they could see lower levels as party systems develop to become organizations of mobilization. Either way, the age of the democratic experience could shape turnout levels and produce a different level of campaign activity. Greece, Portugal, Spain and East Germany are counted as new democracies for this purpose. Of potentially more consequence is the number of parties in a particular system: more parties should produce more campaign activity, everything else being equal. Of more significance still is the level of polarization among these parties over the EU. If parties within the party system are in disagreement over questions concerning the European Union, then campaigns are likely to be much more heated and active than if there is general agreement. Overall levels of campaign activity should, then, be higher when there are high levels of polarization in the party system (see e.g. Zaller, 1992). To measure polarization we rely on data collected by Marks and Steenbergen on party positions towards European integration. We take the maximum distance between any two parties on a 7-point scale. Finally we included a battery of standard demographic controls for party contact including age, education, gender, ideology and level of media use and attention.

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FIGURE 1
CAMPAIGN ACTIVITY BY COUNTRY
(% who report being exposed to ...)

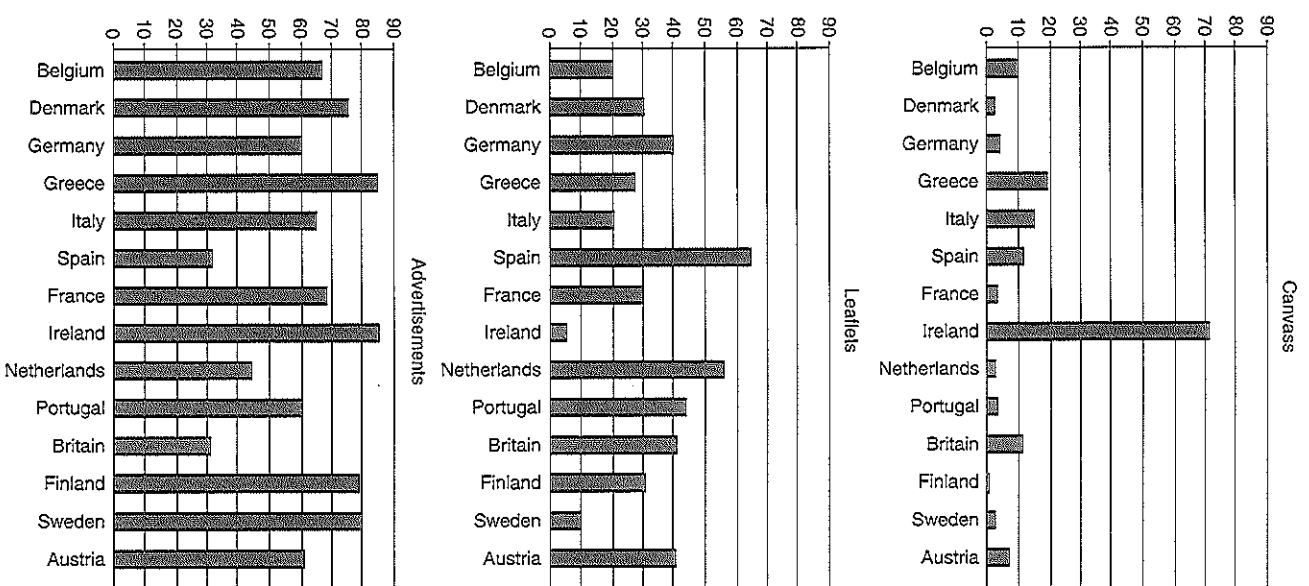


TABLE 1
PREDICTING CAMPAIGN ACTIVITY

	(Model 1) Canvass	(Model 2) Canvass	(Model 3) Leaflet	(Model 4) Leaflet	(Model 5) Ads	(Model 6) Ads	(Model 7) All
Age	0.006 (0.35)	-0.001 (0.05)	0.017 (1.44)	0.011 (0.89)	-0.004 (0.32)	-0.006 (0.51)	0.003 (0.37)
Education	0.018 (0.75)	0.009 (0.40)	0.076*** (4.70)	0.065*** (4.00)	0.084*** (5.16)	0.080*** (4.92)	0.042*** (3.96)
Student	-0.271*** (3.70)	-0.271*** (3.74)	-0.271*** (5.72)	-0.260*** (5.50)	-0.202*** (4.24)	-0.199*** (4.17)	-0.145*** (4.66)
Sex	-0.038 (1.23)	-0.049 (1.62)	-0.020 (0.96)	-0.028 (1.31)	-0.029 (1.34)	-0.031 (1.46)	-0.017 (1.23)
Left	-0.014 (0.33)	0.003 (0.07)	0.102*** (3.48)	0.119*** (4.07)	0.085*** (2.88)	0.091*** (3.09)	0.050*** (2.61)
Right	0.191*** (4.16)	0.197*** (4.36)	0.094*** (2.81)	0.107*** (3.08)	0.074*** (2.21)	0.077*** (2.31)	0.056*** (2.71)
Party numbers	-0.096*** (8.90)	-0.037*** (4.10)	-0.033*** (5.04)	-0.012* (1.96)	-0.021*** (3.21)	-0.012* (1.96)	-0.028*** (6.07)
New democracy	0.670*** (12.12)	0.542*** (9.90)	0.076** (2.03)	-0.036 (0.98)	0.185*** (4.96)	0.149*** (4.07)	0.141*** (5.44)
Media use	0.012** (2.01)	-0.003 (0.43)	0.032*** (7.53)	0.018*** (4.41)	0.049*** (11.57)	0.044*** (10.71)	0.023*** (8.09)
Paid TV ads allowed	0.198*** (4.44)	0.267*** (6.02)	-0.117*** (4.10)	-0.098*** (3.50)	-0.257*** (9.12)	-0.247*** (8.78)	-0.087*** (4.75)
Polarization	-0.029 (1.07)	-0.214*** (8.70)	0.249*** (14.32)	0.156*** (9.77)	0.406*** (23.18)	0.374*** (22.94)	0.198*** (16.33)
Ireland	1.131*** (12.63)	1.830*** (27.12)	0.542*** (7.58)	0.981*** (15.16)	0.958*** (14.17)	1.114*** (18.47)	0.511*** (12.58)
EP closed list	-0.397*** (7.92)	-0.222*** (5.02)	-0.556*** (19.72)	-0.474*** (17.22)	-0.410*** (14.60)	-0.382*** (13.88)	-0.331*** (16.46)
NP Candidate system	0.722*** (12.32)		0.478*** (14.42)		0.167*** (5.10)		0.267*** (11.61)
Concurrent election	0.658*** (8.05)	0.095 (1.49)	0.192*** (3.98)	-0.063 (1.42)	0.066 (1.37)	-0.028 (0.64)	0.164*** (4.73)
Constant	-1.149*** (6.44)	-0.265 (1.58)	-1.078*** (8.85)	-0.456*** (4.01)	-2.111*** (17.15)	-1.903*** (16.37)	-0.825*** (9.84)
Observations	15728	15728	15728	15728	15728	15728	15728

Absolute value of z statistics in parentheses;

*P<.10; **P<.05; ***P<.01

TABLE 2
PREDICTING TURNOUT AS A FUNCTION OF CAMPAIGN ACTIVITY

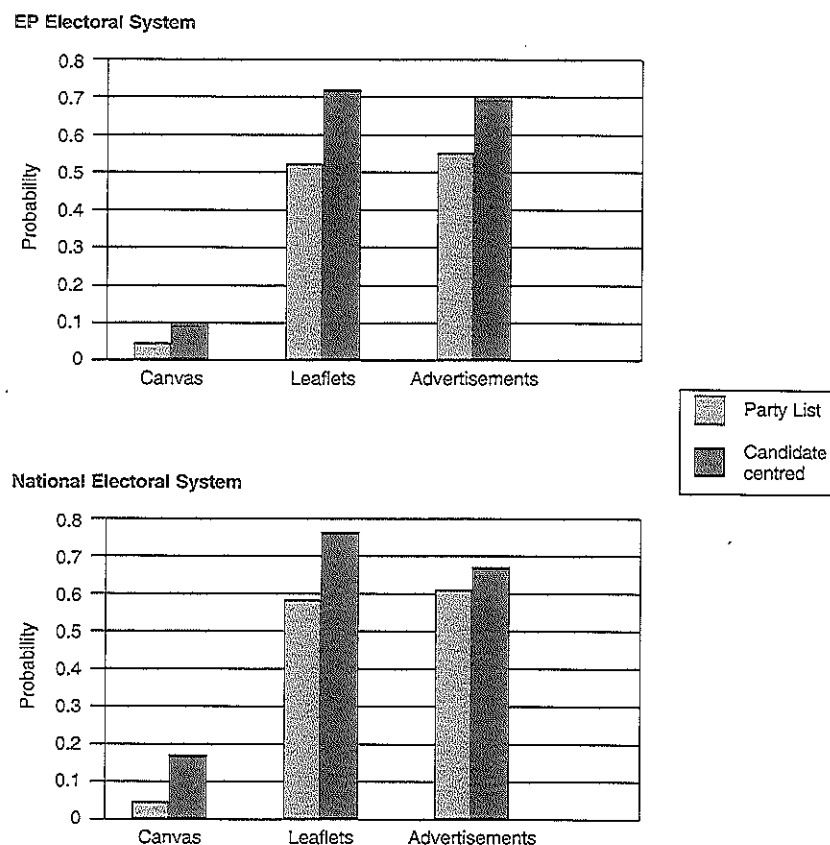
	(Model 1)	(Model 2)
Age	0.205*** (15.95)	0.206*** (16.03)
Education	0.048*** (2.84)	0.049*** (2.87)
Student	-0.617*** (12.47)	-0.618*** (12.47)
Sex	-0.028 (1.24)	-0.027 (1.18)
Left	0.172*** (5.53)	0.168*** (5.41)
Right	0.202*** (5.73)	0.202*** (5.75)
Party numbers	0.094*** (12.58)	0.094*** (12.51)
Compulsory voting	1.035*** (21.41)	1.092*** (21.38)
Concurrent election	0.318*** (7.22)	0.352*** (7.81)
Media usage	0.038*** (8.67)	0.040*** (9.13)
Polarization	0.202*** (12.13)	0.231*** (12.38)
Canvass	0.342*** (7.96)	0.317*** (7.28)
Leaflet	0.195*** (7.31)	0.183*** (6.79)
Ads	0.288*** (10.74)	0.287*** (10.70)
Paid	0.167*** (4.65)	0.159*** (4.42)
EU important	-0.036*** (2.92)	-0.033*** (2.67)
EU a Good Thing	0.396*** (15.46)	0.399*** (15.57)
EU a Bad Thing	-0.159*** (4.26)	-0.160*** (4.27)
Sociotropic	-0.032* (1.76)	-0.029 (1.60)
Pocketbook	0.008 (0.35)	0.004 (0.20)
Border area	-0.026 (0.63)	-0.015 (0.38)
EP closed list	0.422*** (11.51)	0.442*** (11.91)
NP Candidate system		0.113*** (3.46)
Constant	-3.356*** (22.82)	-3.582*** (22.25)
Observations	14984	14984

Absolute value of z statistics in parentheses

*P<.10; **P<.05; ***P<.01

whether the national electoral system is candidate based. They also hold regardless of whether we consider each type of campaign activity individually (models 1–6) or cumulatively (model 7). While the multi-partyism associated with PR systems is expected to contribute to higher levels of party contact, we see that it is negatively associated with all forms of party activity. As expected, in all but one model, polarization of the party system appears to generate more activity. Those on the right side of the ideological spectrum are also more likely to be mobilized while students are less likely to be exposed to the campaign.

FIGURE 2
PROBABILITY OF EXPOSURE TO PARTY CAMPAIGN ACTIVITY
BY ELECTORAL SYSTEM



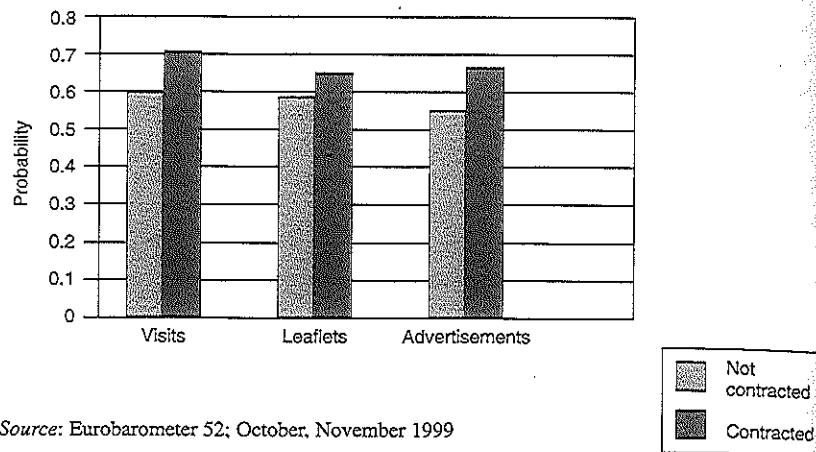
Source: Eurobarometer 52; October, November 1999

Figure 2 shows the probabilities of being exposed to the campaign through party canvassing, leaflets and advertisements. These probabilities are derived from Table 1 and represent the likelihood of campaign exposure for closed list and candidate-based electoral systems, holding all other variables constant at their mean values. As is evident from the figure, citizens are more likely to be exposed to leaflets and advertisements. Yet in candidate-based systems, the odds of being contacted increase substantially. To be specific, in a candidate-based system, a citizen has a 20% greater chance of receiving a leaflet or seeing an advertisement than a citizen who is in a closed list PR system. The difference is greatest for canvassing, where voters under a candidate-based system are twice as likely to be contacted as those under a closed list system (albeit at a still relatively low level of probability).

To consider the impact that these campaign efforts might have on turnout we can note several patterns. First we do see from Table 2 that campaign activity has a positive impact on a citizen's likelihood of voting. Parties, then, can and do make a difference to the overall rate of voting. To estimate the size of the difference we report probabilities in Figure 3 that show the likelihood of voting when a citizen reports being exposed to various types of campaign activity. As Figure 3 shows, personal visits are the most effective means of mobilizing voters. Those who are canvassed have a probability of voting of .73, while those who are not have a probability of voting of .60, all other things being equal. Other forms of campaign activity produce similar, albeit smaller, effects. Nevertheless, when one considers the greater proportion of citizens reached by advertisements and leaflets (see Figure 1), these activities can effectively produce higher rates of overall turnout.

Second, we also see the basic pattern that we noted at the outset to this article: list PR is associated with generally higher levels of turnout than candidate-based systems. Even after controlling for such other institutional factors as concurrent elections and compulsory voting, both of which increase the odds that citizens will vote in the European elections, list-based systems still produce higher turnout. Specifically, citizens in list PR systems have a probability of voting of .70 compared to citizens who reside in systems without a list system who have a probability of voting of .54. As with the models on campaign activity these results are robust to a wide range of different definitions of electoral systems. PR systems are thus associated with both higher turnout and lower levels of campaign activity than systems that are district based. Thus while list-based systems produce higher turnout, the mechanism at work does not appear to be one of party mobilization.

FIGURE 3
INFLUENCE OF EXPOSURE TO CAMPAIGN ACTIVITY ON PROBABILITY
OF VOTING



Source: Eurobarometer 52; October, November 1999

Conclusion

Advocates of PR have long argued that voters are more likely to be mobilized in proportional systems because there are more parties competing for votes. This has led to the assumption that there is greater mobilization under PR because of the increased competition in multi-party systems. The empirical evidence, however, indicates that this is not necessarily the case. While polarized party systems appear to contribute to greater campaign activity, a larger number of parties seem to produce the opposite result. Closed list (PR) systems have lower levels of campaign activity than candidate-based systems. While our analysis has been confined to European Parliamentary elections, we believe the findings may also extend to national elections. Using national election survey data, we examined whether citizens were more likely to report being contacted by a political party in seven countries representing PR and SMP systems (Karp, Banducci and Bowler, 2002). The results were generally consistent with the findings presented here. Citizens in SMP systems (all candidate-based) systems were far more likely to be contacted by a political party in a national election campaign than in closed list PR systems.

These findings lead us to conclude that candidate-based systems may have advantages that stimulate greater mobilization even though overall turnout may be lower than in PR systems. One possible explanation for this

result is that candidates are more likely to be touch with their supporters when they have an incentive to cultivate a personal vote. Such a pattern presents a puzzle for our understanding of turnout since, plainly, the higher levels of turnout under PR cannot be associated with higher levels of party campaigning under PR. We must, then, look elsewhere for an explanation of turnout under PR.

APPENDIX: QUESTION WORDING

'At the European election last June parties and candidates campaigned for votes. For each of the following please tell me whether their campaign came to your attention in that way or not?'

[possible answers: Yes, No, DK]

Party workers called to your home to ask for votes

Elections leaflets put in your letterbox or given to you on the street or in shopping centers etc

Advertising on behalf of the candidates or parties

NOTES

1. Descriptions of electoral systems were accessed at www3.europarl.eu.int/election/law/en/maps_en.htm.
2. In alternative models, we considered finer-grained distinctions between national electoral systems that distinguished between closed and open list PR as well as mixed systems and constructed a four-fold classification of electoral systems. See e.g. Bowler and Farrell 1993 for a similar categorization of electoral systems and campaign activity among MEPs. Results from these models are available on request.
3. We follow the categorization used by IDEA. The source for the data was accessed at www.idea.int/vt/analysis/Compulsory_Voting.cfm#compulsory and allowed us to categorize Belgium and Luxembourg as strongly enforcing compulsory voting and Austria and Greece as weakly enforcing.

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