Social Desirability and Response Validity: A Comparative Analysis of Overreporting Voter Turnout in Five Countries

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Theory and evidence suggests that respondents are likely to overreport voter turnout in election surveys because they have a strong incentive to offer a socially desirable response. We suggest that contextual influences may affect the socially desirable bias, leading to variance in the rate of over-reporting across countries. This leads us to hypothesize that nonvoters will be more likely to over-report voting in elections that have high turnout. We rely on validated turnout data to measure overreporting in five countries which vary a great deal in turnout: Britain, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the United States. We find that in national settings with higher levels of par-ticipation, the tendency to overreport turnout may be greater than in settings where low participation is the norm.

T he validity of self-reported turnout has been a problem confronting political scientists since the earliest election surveys. It is not uncommon to find that the proportion of respondents who report voting exceeds the estimates of actual voter turnout. In some cases the discrepancy between official results and reported behavior has been substantial. For example, during the 1990s, the gap between official turnout in presidential elections and reported turnout in the American National Election Studies (ANES) is over 20 percentage points.[1] Concern over the accuracy of voting behavior has led to a large body of research on overre-porting voter turnout. While there may be many factors that contribute to error, such as memory failure (Belli et al. 1999), question-ordering effects (Presser 1990), or nonresponse bias (Jackman 1999), the most common explanation is that respondents are motivated to give a socially desirable response to cast themselves in a favorable light (see for example, Clausen 1968; Silver, Anderson, and Abram-son 1986; Traugott and Katosh 1979). Evidence to support this conclusion has

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[1] Reported turnout in presidential elections in the 1990s is between 73 and 75% while actual turnout is estimated at about 50%.

been based on voter validation studies that match a respondent's reported turnout against official election records. These validation studies have suggested that inaccuracies in self-reported behavior are largely due to respondents who claim to have voted when in fact they have not. According to Silver, Anderson, and Abramson (1986, 614), between 90 and 96% of all vote misreports can be attributed to people who did not actually vote. Validation studies in New Zealand, Britain, and Sweden also indicate that the error is due to overreporting (Granberg and Holmberg 1991; Karp and Banducci 1999; Swaddle and Heath 1989).

Although overreporting may be a potential problem, it has largely been assumed that the social desirability bias is a general human trait that affects everyone equally (Blais 2000; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995, 292). This assumption has lead some researchers to conclude that validated turnout produces essentially the same results as those relying on reported turnout (Katosh and Traugott 1981; Sigelman 1982; Swaddle and Heath 1989). Yet other studies have found that those overreporting are likely to differ significantly from those telling the truth. They are more likely to have the characteristics of those already predisposed to vote: the highly educated, those that accept the norm of voting, and those with high levels of partisan attachment and a distinct concern over the outcome of the election (Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001; Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986). The pattern is consistent with the expectation, that those who have more education are more likely to be aware of socially acceptable behavior and will thus try to appear in conformity with social norms (Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986). Although high voter participation is assumed to be a social norm, participation rates vary widely across different types of elections and across countries. In recent elections in the United States, for example, it is not uncommon for midterm elections to attract less than a third of eligible voters while presidential elections attract just about half of the eligible voters. If social norms influence respondents, overreporting should be systematically related to the level of turnout in a given election. When more people vote, one should expect nonvoters to be more likely to overreport voting.

Along these lines, when Granberg and Holmberg (1991, 458) analyzed Swedish nonvoters, they expected overreporting to be somewhat higher in Sweden than in the United States. They found, however that the rate of reporting was very similar between the two countries which they acknowledged presented "something of a puzzle." In a later study, Andersson and Granberg (1997, 129) compare the results from studies in Sweden, the United States, and Britain and conclude that the percentage of people falsely claiming to have voted is virtually indistinguishable. If these estimates are correct, then one can assume that the rate of overreporting has little to do with context or social norms.

The question of whether social norms influence response validity is now a more salient issue with the implementation of large-scale cross-national surveys. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), for example, is a collaborate project among election teams in as many as 50 countries designed to assess the

influence of electoral systems on political behavior.[2] Systematic differences across nations, should they exist, may affect the reliability of measures drawn from multinational samples and may also undermine the validity of inferences from data like the CSES. Indeed, understanding the existence and nature of cross-national variance in overreporting of turnout is of keen interest to those using pooled election surveys to explain variance in actual turnout across democratic nations.

In this study we consider how context may influence response validity. To address the question we examine survey data where context varies in two ways. First we compare overreporting across countries that vary considerably in turnout. Second, we compare overreporting within countries across different types of elections that vary in salience. We find that context helps explain why overreporting occurs and has implications for researchers who wish to use survey data to examine participation in a cross-national context.

Turnout in a Comparative Context

Estimates of voter turnout from election surveys around the globe suggest that there is a wide potential for error. In Britain, for example, after adjusting for the representativeness of the sample, 73% of the eligible voters surveyed in the 2001 British Election Study (BES) reported voting while official turnout was estimated at 58%. In Switzerland, 62% of the respondents who were eligible to vote in a 1999 election survey reported voting while official turnout based on age-eligible population was estimated at 35%. These figures help to illustrate the point that there can be a considerable discrepancy between reported and estimated turnout. Of course there can be many reasons other than overreporting for the exaggerated estimates. Those who are more likely to vote in an election, for example, may also be more likely to participate in an election survey.[3] But let us assume for the moment that discrepancies between reported and actual turnout are due entirely to overreporting. In countries where turnout is low, there is likely to be a wider discrepancy because there are more nonvoters at risk of overreporting. At the same time, however, there is reason to expect that the rate of overreporting will be lower in these studies. If social desirability is a factor, then presumably it will exert less influence in countries with low levels of turnout than in countries where high turnout is the norm. After all, a nonvoter may not have much fear of being a social outcast in a country like Switzerland where just a third of the electorate goes to the polls. In contrast, in a country such as Denmark, where eight out of 10 citizens go to the polls, the incentive to overreport should be higher. Thus the likelihood of overreporting should decrease as the proportion of nonvoters increases. Put another way, because error due to misreporting is largely confined to nonvoters, estimates of turnout are likely to be more biased when

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[2] See http://www.umich.edu/~cses/ for a full description of the CSES project.

[3] Actual estimates of turnout based on age-eligible population might also be prone to error.

there are more nonvoters in a given sample. At the same time, the *probability* that any single respondent will overreport may be lower.

Our goal here is not to explain the source of the error but rather to consider how context might influence the probability of overreporting. To examine this question, we turn to an analysis of data from several countries where rates of participation vary widely and for which reported behavior has been validated.

Research Design

We have identified election studies in five countries that have independently checked a respondent's reported behavior with election officials. These countries include Britain, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the United States. In Sweden and Norway, the official voting records are centralized with the census, making it relatively easy and cost effective to validate respondent behavior. In both countries these records are nearly complete and accurate (Granberg and Holmberg 1991; Waldahl and Aardal 2000). In New Zealand, official records of whether a person has voted are held by the local registrar of electors and are available for public inspection. Voter registration is compulsory and the Electoral Enrolment Centre (EEC) compiles and maintains the electoral rolls. These records were made available to the New Zealand Election Study (NZES) which used the list to draw its post-election survey sample (Vowles et al. 2002, 1998).[4] Similarly, in Britain, the sample for the BES consists of persons who are on the electoral registers.[5] Official records are compiled by the presiding officer at every polling station and later deposited with the Clerk of the Crown and are available for public inspection. In the United States, in contrast, voting records are kept locally making the validation process more difficult and more prone to error (see Presser, Traugott, and Traugott 1990). In all of these countries, voter validation studies have been conducted for at least several elections.

These five countries vary a great deal in turnout. Among the five countries, Sweden's turnout is the highest, with an average of about 82% of the age-eligible population voting in the 1990s (IDEA 2002). During the same time period, turnout in New Zealand has averaged 79%, while turnout in Norway is about 76%. From an international perspective, these three countries have turnout rates that are about average compared to other Western democracies. Britain's turnout is somewhat lower, averaging 72% in the 1990s. In comparison, turnout in presidential elections in the U.S. is about 20% lower than Britain during the same time period. These countries thus provide a meaningful sample on which to base the analysis. While we suspect that a country with a high level of turnout will be associated with a higher rate of overreporting, we may also anticipate differences

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[4] See http://www.nzes.org for further information on the New Zealand Election Study.

[5] The 1997 BES also included a sample of ineligible voters. For consistency, these respondents have been dropped from the analysis. Respondents from Scotland and Wales were not validated and therefore have also been dropped.

within countries, depending on the nature of the election. For instance, in the U.S., midterm elections fail to attract more than a third of eligible voters. In presidential elections, where turnout is higher (though still low by comparative standards), one might expect overreporting to be higher than in midterm elections where low turnout is the norm.

Since our focus is on overreporting rather than misreporting, we follow Silver, Anderson, and Abramson (1986) and restrict the analysis to nonvoters. Nonvoters are classified as those who have no official record of voting. In the United States persons for whom no registration record could be found are also classified as nonvoters.[6] In the remaining countries, the few cases that have missing data are excluded from the analysis.

Sample size is obviously more of a problem in those countries with the fewest nonvoters. To achieve a reasonable sample of nonvoters we have pooled data across as many elections as possible. For the United States, we use the *American National Election Study 1948–1998 Cumulative File*, which includes validated data from eight elections. For the other countries, we have pooled individual election studies from each of the most recent elections in the respective countries.[7] The Appendix reports the 23 elections included in this analysis. The time span thus varies from nine years in New Zealand, 10 years in Britain and Sweden, 17 years in Norway, and 26 years in the United States.[8]

Overreporting by Country and Electoral Saliency

We begin our analysis by examining how overreporting varies by country and by the saliency of elections. Following our discussion above we expect the level of overreporting to be higher in elections that either attract more voters or are viewed as being more important. In the United States we compare presidential elections to midterm elections while in Sweden we compare overreporting in national, regional, and local elections. In the United States, we expect overreporting to be higher in presidential elections than in midterm elections. In Sweden, although voters express their preferences for national, local, and regional elections at the same time with the same ballot, local elections have lower visibility and salience. Therefore, we may expect the pressure to overreport to be

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[6] In the ANES 1949–98 Cumulative File, the variable is CF9155 and the category is 5. The BES includes a category for those who are on the register but it is not known whether the person voted. For both cases, these persons are classified as nonvoters. In Sweden and Norway there are no missing records. In New Zealand a relatively small number of respondents could not be found on the rolls and were excluded from analysis.

[7] The 1993 Norwegian Election is not included because the available data set did not include data on voter validation. The 1990 New Zealand Election Study did include a voter validation study but was not included in this analysis because the study lacked appropriate attitudinal data.

[8] The United States time span is heavily influenced by the inclusion of data from 1964. Between 1964 and 1976 no studies were validated, so the bulk of data from the United States falls within a 14-year time span. Dropping the 1964 U.S. data does not affect our findings.

TABLE 1

Levels of Overreporting by Country and Election Type

Election Type	Overreporting (%)
U.S. Congressional	26.2
Britain	26.5
U.S. Presidential	40.1
Norway	35.0
New Zealand	42.4
Swedish Regional	18.7
Swedish Local	22.0
Swedish National	26.2

Note: Sweden holds elections for three levels of government simultaneously on the same ballot. Unless otherwise noted, all data are based on national parliamentary elections.

See Appendix for data source.

lower in local and regional elections than in national elections that are generally viewed as being more important.

Table 1 reports the level of overreporting across all five countries with the countries ordered from low to high turnout. Across the three English-speaking countries, the results are generally more consistent with our hypotheses than across the two Scandinavian cases. The rate of overreporting increases with turnout and is the highest in New Zealand, where there is a tradition of high participation, which contrasts with the United States, where the proportion who overreport in presidential elections is the lowest.[9] The exception is for British elections which we expected to have a higher rate of overreporting than for American presidential elections. The two Scandinavian cases, however, do not appear to be consistent with our expectations. Despite high levels of turnout in Swedish national elections, the level of overreporting is similar to British and American congressional elections. The failure to find consistent differences in the rate of overreporting across all five countries could be due to other cultural norms that vary across these countries. For example, values that a society places on honesty may also influence the survey response. Such a hypothesis is difficult to test but data from the World Values Survey do suggest that citizens in Sweden and Norway

[9]Our estimates of overreporting in the United States are somewhat larger than previous studies. For example, we find that the average rate of overreporting across eight election studies is 32.9% while Silver, Anderson, and Abramson (1986, 613) report an average of 27.2 over four elections. The difference can be attributed to the coding scheme that was used in the cumulative file. In the 1964 original study, nine categories are identified and Silver, Anderson, and Abramson choose to use two of the categories to classify nonvoters. For other election years, the decision rule varied depending on the type of categories reported by the ANES. In the cumulative file these categories are collapsed into three categories. Thus our estimates are more consistent across years and err on the conservative side by overestimating the proportion of those who overreport in the United States (given our expectation that overreporting in the United States should be lower).

are less likely to believe that lying can be justified than citizens in the United States or Britain.[10] This may partially explain why nonvoters in Sweden and Norway are less likely to lie about voting than their counterparts in the United States or Britain.

Another approach that provides a stronger test is to examine rates of overreporting within these countries. Here the results are more consistent with our expectations. Within the United States, the rate of overreporting is higher in presidential elections than in midterm elections. Specifically, in midterm elections, about a quarter of nonvoters report voting, compared to 40% who overreport in presidential elections. The differences between these types of elections may have been overlooked as most of the studies of overreporting in the United States are based on the earlier validation studies that were conducted on presidential elections. For example, Clausen's (1968) analysis is based on the 1964 elections while Traugott and Katosh (1979) focus on the 1976 election. Later, Silver, Anderson, and Abramson (1986) examined overreporting in the 1964, 1976, and 1980 presidential elections. It was not until 1978 that the first validation study was conducted in a nonpresidential year followed by two more midterm elections validated in 1986 and 1990. Further evidence to suggest that overreporting varies by context is available in Sweden. The rate of overreporting declines from 26% for national elections to 22% for local elections and drops a further three percentage points for regional elections. While not intuitive, it is arguable that regional elections might be even less salient than local elections in Sweden, as regional elections are not held in every local jurisdiction.[11] Altogether, these results suggest that error associated with overreporting may vary systematically with context.

Individual-Level Analysis

To examine this issue further we turn to a multivariate analysis that takes into account individual characteristics associated with overreporting in all five countries. Table 2 reports the results of six logistic regression models limited to independent variables that can be consistently measured across the five countries and 23 electoral studies. Our contextual variable of interest is turnout, which is meas-

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[10] Respondents in Britain, the United States, Sweden, and Norway were asked to rank their responses to the following question on a scale of 1–10: "Please tell me whether you think lying in your own interest can always be justified (10), never be justified (1), or something in between (5)." In Sweden and Norway, less than 15% responded with a value of 4–10 compared to 23% in the United States and 31% in Britain (The 1990–91 World Values Survey ICPSR# 6160). New Zealand was not included in the study.

[11] Three localities, Göteborg, Malmö, and the island of Gotland do not hold regional "landsting" elections. Furthermore, the three electoral levels, "Riksdag" or national parliament, "kommunfullmäktige" or local, and "landsting" regional elections are always listed in survey material in that implied descending order. This suggests that regional elections are less important than local elections, which are decided by every voter in Sweden.

TABLE 2

Predicting Overreporting in Five Countries: Logistic Regression Coefficients

Variables	Pooled	Britain	U.S.	N.Z.	Sweden	Norway
Strength of party identification	.28**	.61**	.23**	.26**	.27*	.35**
	(.02)	(.07)	(.04)	(.05)	(.11)	(.08)
Attentiveness	1.32**	.55**	1.53**	1.91**	.02	1.50**
	(.07)	(.20)	(.10)	(.21)	(.40)	(.36)
Age	.004**	.00	.004**	.00	.01	.00
	(.001)	(.00)	(.002)	(.00)	(.01)	(.01)
Female	−.06	.09	−.21	−.09	.17	.15
	(.05)	(.11)	(.07)	(.10)	(.24)	(.17)
University degree	.40**	.38*	.49**	−.01	.68	.30
	(.07)	(.19)	(.10)	(.18)	(.35)	(.22)
Turnout	.01**	.11**	.03**	.20**	.07	.09**
	(.00)	(.04)	(.00)	(.02)	(.08)	(.02)
Intercept	−2.84**	−11.26**	−7.92	−17.92**	−7.92	−9.51
	(.13)	(2.98)	(.21)	(1.56)	(6.68)	(1.66)
Nagelkerke R^2	.11	.10	.11	.17	.05	.12
% Correctly Predicted	66.20	73.30	7.00	67.20	78.00	68.00
n	9,469	1,731	4,717	1,846	435	740

**p < .01; *p < .05.

Note: All models are restricted to validated nonvoters. Dependent variable coded 1 for overreporting turnout; 0 if turnout accurately reported. First model estimated with all five countries pooled; the remaining estimations limited to specific countries.

Standard errors are in parentheses.

ured at the previous election on an age-eligible basis. This allows us to more accurately represent the time required for the reality of established participation patterns to diffuse through the society to the point where it becomes an accepted norm of behavior.[12] In the case of the United States, with both presidential and midterm elections, turnout from the previous election type is used. Strength of party identification is based on a 4-point scale reflecting strength of attachment to a given party, with a higher value representing a stronger attachment. Attentiveness is a measure of attention paid to the campaign, with care taken to utilize questions that approximately measure the same source of attentiveness. Differences in educational systems across the five countries necessitate simplification in a measure of educational attainment. Therefore, a dummy variable is used to represent whether the respondent holds a university degree. With the exceptions of age and turnout, which are interval measures, and strength of partisanship,

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[12] Source for age-eligible turnout is the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). See http://www.idea.int/voter_turnout/index.html.

which is a 4-point ordinal scale, all measures are rescaled to consistent metrics of zero to one to ensure comparability across countries.

The first model reported in Table 2 includes all 23 elections from the five countries we examine. Since turnout in the five countries varies considerably, the potential pool of cases in the "at risk" group of validated nonvoters varies as well, having the potentially undesirable effect of systematically weighting the data in the direction of those countries with lower levels of turnout. To ensure that no single country biases the results, discrete models for each of the five countries are also reported in Table 2.

The results of the first model are consistent with both the existing literature on the sources of overreporting and our expectations regarding context. Those who are already predisposed to vote, such as the stronger partisans, the elderly, those most attentive to politics, and those with university degrees are more likely to offer the socially desirable response by claiming to have voted. Furthermore, these data depict a relationship between established participation rates and overreporting, suggesting a connection between actual voting rates and the norm of participation, which in turn leads to the desire for those predisposed to vote to feel pressured to offer a socially desirable response to a survey interviewer.

It is possible, of course, that these estimates are biased by the asymmetrical sample sizes in the five countries. Nevertheless, in four of the five countries, turnout is a significant predictor of overreporting, which suggests that the estimate in the pooled model is not influenced by the large sample sizes in the United States and Britain. Only in Sweden is turnout not a significant predictor of overreporting. This may be a function of Sweden having the smallest sample size of the five countries, having the weakest overall model fit, and having the smallest amount of variance in turnout across the four elections included in the Swedish sample.[13] Of all the explanatory variables included in the pooled model, only age and possibly education appear to be biased by the size of the United States sample. While age is a significant predictor of overreporting in the pooled model, it is only significant in the United States.

The main finding in Table 2 is that electoral context, measured by lagged turnout, is a significant predictor of overreporting in the pooled model and in four of the five country-specific models. Only in Sweden, where the sample size is the smallest, is the coefficient for turnout not significant, though the sign is in the expected direction. The pattern of overreporting observed in Table 1 across the three types of elections held simultaneously using the same ballot suggests that the null result in the Swedish model may be a function of sample size and variance. Although the coefficient for turnout is reduced when all five countries are included in the same model, it nevertheless has a sizeable influence. Specifically, when all other variables are held constant at their mean values, the probability of overreporting increases from .25 to .38 as the level of turnout increases

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[13] The United States has the highest variance on this measure, which is not surprising considering the inclusion of congressional and presidential elections in the sample, while Norway has the second-highest variance.

from a minimum of 30 to 80%. Taken together, these results support our hypothesis that context is a factor in explaining overreporting.

The demands of consistent measurement across the five countries place restrictions on the model specification in Table 2. In light of this, and the low model fit, it is possible that we are overlooking some unmeasured factor that is conflated with turnout. For example, political attitudes such as citizen duty and efficacy have been demonstrated in the past to influence voter participation (Blais 2000). It is also likely that a sense of civic duty and efficacy are influenced by social norms. Therefore, the contextual effects observed in Table 2 may result from higher levels of civic duty and efficacy that are likely to be present in countries with higher levels of turnout.

Unfortunately, measures of civic duty and efficacy are not available in Norway or Sweden, but they are available in the other election studies in our analysis. Table 3 reports an enhanced model that includes these measures that pools cases from Britain, the United States, and New Zealand. The civic duty variable, measured as similarly as possible across the three countries, addresses whether or not the respondent believes that it is a citizen's civic duty to participate in elections. The available efficacy measures were based on whether the respondent believes that he or she has a say in what the government does.[14] Finally, we have added a measure of racial minority status (which was also not available in Norway or Sweden), as some debate exists in the extant literature regarding the role of minority status and its influence on overreporting (Abramson and Claggett 1984; Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001).

The results in Table 3 support the hypothesis that overreporting is influenced by contextual conditions as well as individual attitudes and attributes. While both civic duty and efficacy increase the probability of a respondent overreporting turnout, the turnout variable retains significance and substance in the presence of these additional controls.[15] To ease the interpretation of the logit coefficients, we estimated the probability of overreporting for the most influential variables, holding other variables constant at the mean values. This illustration demonstrates that while context is a factor, individual attributes and attitudes also matter. As Figure 1 reveals, the effects of turnout are comparable to the effects of strength of partisanship. In both cases, a nonvoter's probability of overreporting turnout doubles when moving from the lowest to the highest value. The effects of civic duty and attentiveness are somewhat stronger, indicating that these individual attributes have a strong influence in all three countries.

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[14] Question wording was similar in all but the 1997 BES where we relied instead on the following question to measure efficacy: "Parties are only interested in people's votes not in their opinions."

[15] Note that in addition to losing two countries from the sample, additional cases are lost within the three countries available for analysis due to missing values, generally from the United States sample, as the measures of civic duty and efficacy only appear together in the 1976, 1978, and 1980 surveys, but this analysis also excludes the 1992 British Election Study for the same reason.

TABLE 3

The Role of Civic Duty and Efficacy: Logistic Regression Coefficients

	Estimate
Strength of party identification	.19**
	(.03)
Minority	.05
	(.08)
Attentiveness	1.17**
	(.11)
Civic Duty	1.28**
	(.11)
Efficacy	.32**
	(.09)
Age	.00
	(.00)
Female	−.06
	(.07)
University degree	.38**
	(.11)
Turnout	.02**
	(.00)
Intercept	−3.87**
	(.21)
Nagelkerke R^2	.16
% Correctly Predicted	67.50
n	4,545

**$p < .01$.

Note: Norway and Sweden not included. Dependent variable coded 1 for overreporting turnout; 0 if turnout accurately reported. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Consequences

While the consensus in the literature appears to be that voting behavior models based on self-reported turnout do not vary significantly from those based on validated turnout (e.g. Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986), recent work concludes that the use of reported vote "substantially distorts standard multivariate explanations of voting, increasing the apparent importance of independent variables that are related in the same direction to both overreporting and voting, while sharply decreasing the importance of independent variables related in opposing directions to those two variables. Those distortions can be severe enough to cause researchers to miss support for some hypotheses or falsely accept support for others" (Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001, 41).

To examine this issue, Table 4 reports two simple models of participation based on a pooled sample of all 23 election studies from the five countries represented in the above analysis. These models use the same variables as those in Table 2.

FIGURE 1

Relative Effects of Turnout and Other Explanatory Variables on the Probability of Individual Overreporting
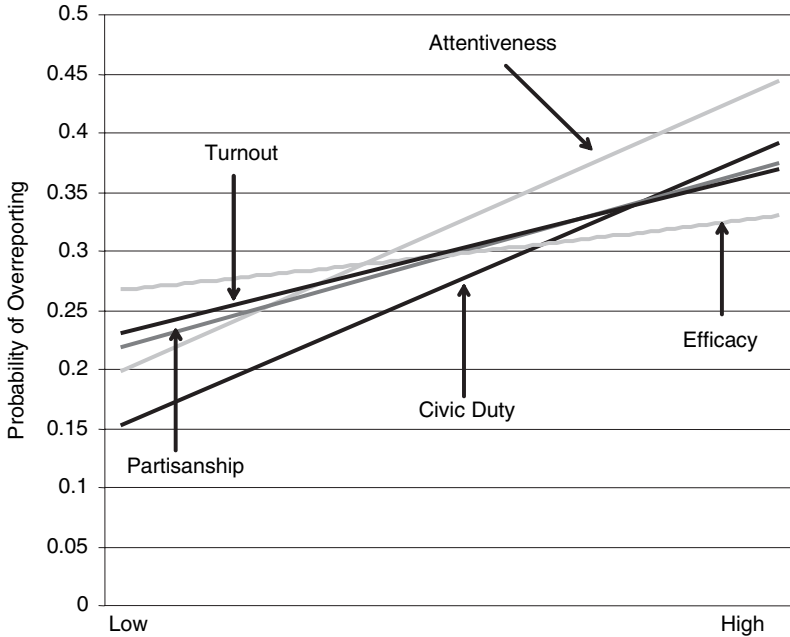
Note: Estimates derived from Table 3 holding all others at their mean values.

We have also included a variable denoting whether or not the country uses proportional representation. The first model predicts reported turnout for the dependent variable, while the second model predicts validated turnout. The sample size in each model is considerably higher than the models reported in Table 2, as we are no longer constrained by limiting our analysis to the "at-risk" group of validated nonvoters. When the two models are compared, one sees both a reduced fit and a reduced substantive effect of most variables in predicting turnout in the validated model, reflecting the effect of the "social desirability" hypothesis. These results are to be expected, given that nonvoters who falsely claim to vote are those who share the attributes that make them predisposed to vote. These attributes include strength of partisanship, attentiveness, and education, which all appear to decrease in substance in the validated model. Only age appears to have the same effect. The effect of proportional representation lends further support to our findings thus far. As suggested above, higher levels of turnout increase the perception that voting in elections is socially desirable. Therefore, we should expect higher levels of overreporting in countries with PR, since these systems are asso-

TABLE 4

Predicting Turnout in Five Countries: Logistic Regression Coefficients

	Reported	Validated
Strength of Party Identification	.30**	.20**
	(.01)	(.01)
Attentiveness	1.78**	1.11**
	(.04)	(.04)
Age	.02**	.02**
	(.00)	(.00)
Female	.05	.05
	(.03)	(.02)
University degree	.52**	.39**
	(.04)	(.04)
Proportional Representation	1.81**	1.37**
	(.03)	(.03)
Intercept	−1.46**	−1.05**
	(.05)	(.05)
Nagelkerke R^2	.26	.16
% Correctly Predicted	84.10	81.00
n	54,522	51,297

**$p < .01$.

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

ciated with higher levels of turnout (see for example, Blais and Carty 1990). Therefore it is not surprising that the effect of proportional representation in an individual-level model of turnout is stronger when predicting the *reported* vote than it is when predicting the *validated* vote. Respondents are more likely to overreport in proportional representation countries than others, as the rate of participation in such countries tends to be higher.[16]

Discussion

The results presented above tend to support our hypothesis that the social desirability bias that leads to overreporting in election surveys varies with electoral context. Variation in overreporting within countries is partially explained by the level of turnout in the previous election, suggesting that elections with higher turnout lead to a higher probability that an individual respondent who has not voted will offer the socially desirable response.

Ideally we would have liked to test these hypotheses in more situations where turnout varies widely. Elections to the European parliament, which typically have

[16] In 1996, New Zealand held its first election under a mixed-member proportional system, replacing its first-past-the-post plurality system. The 1993 election in New Zealand is coded 0 for the PR variable, while the 1996, 1999, and 2002 elections are coded 1.

very low turnout regardless of the level of turnout at national elections, would provide another case in which to test our hypotheses. Unfortunately, voter validation studies of European elections have yet to be conducted. Nevertheless, the two examples of within-country comparisons provide some support for our expectations. Sweden holds elections for three levels of government on the same day and ballot (national, regional, and municipal). Overreporting is related to the level of election even though turnout drops for lower offices on the ballot. Moreover, midterm elections in the United States reveal lower levels of overreporting than presidential elections. When considered together, these findings suggest that respondents are likely to be influenced at least partially by the context in which they are surveyed. In national settings with higher levels of participation, the tendency to overreport turnout may be greater than in settings where low participation is the norm.

This is an important consideration for those conducting research on turnout in cross-national settings. While overreporting was not a concern for earlier aggregate studies of turnout that considered the role of electoral institutions or economic conditions, those now exploiting new data sources such as the CSES should take this into consideration when interpreting their results. Comparisons between models of turnout that rely on reported and validated votes suggests that contextual influences on overreporting affect some explanatory variables at different rates, and that the participatory benefits of certain types of electoral arrangements might be somewhat overstated by studies that rely on individual level data.

Appendix: Elections Included in the Analysis

Country	Election Studies
Britain	1987, 92, 97
United States	1964, 76, 78, 80, 84, 86, 88, 90
New Zealand	1993, 96, 99, 2002
Sweden	1988, 91, 94, 98
Norway	1981, 85, 89, 97

Acknowledgment

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