


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

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Heather Silber Mohamed 
Clark University

What accounts for the persistently higher turnout rate of non-Hispanic White voters, in comparison with those of other racial/ethnic groups? Bernard Fraga answers this question with his theory of electoral influence: greater group influence—operationalized by the relative size of a group within a given electoral jurisdiction—leads to higher levels of turnout by group members. Fraga compiles an abundance of data to build clear and persuasive evidence in support of his theory, while also refuting alternative explanations for the “turnout gap,” or the difference between the rate of turnout among White and non-White voters.

The book advances a rich theoretical story, supported by deftly woven evidence that incorporates historical analysis, quantitative analysis, and political geography. Fraga demonstrates that the turnout gap has widened over time, with preferences of non-Hispanic White voters increasingly overrepresented in electoral outcomes. Using survey data to infer attitudes of members of different racial/ethnic groups, Fraga argues that in a counterfactual scenario of *no* turnout gap, Democrats would have secured an electoral college victory in 2016 and majorities in the two most recent Senate elections (2012 and 2016).

The second chapter presents a synopsis of major landmarks in voting rights history, and subsequent chapters incorporate an innovative combination of data sources. To build support for his theory, Fraga leverages decades of individual-level data, with samples exceeding millions of respondents.

Theoretically, Fraga unites several seemingly disparate lines of research. Though his explanation is largely structural, he allows for the importance of elite and individual-level variables, arguing that these factors may themselves be determined by group size. For instance, the size of a demographic group is likely to impact elite choices about when and where to mobilize voters; similarly, group size is also likely a prior factor for a

sense of empowerment, traditionally measured by presence of co-ethnic office holders.

Although Fraga builds on a large body of research centered on individual voter behavior, his goal is not to explain individual-level turnout. Rather, he seeks to understand why *group-level* variation in turnout persists, with turnout among non-Hispanic White eligible voters regularly exceeding that of Latinos, Asian Americans, and to a lesser extent, Blacks. In the process, however, he underscores limitations to a finding undergirding the discipline's understanding of voter behavior for decades: the link between socioeconomic status and voter turnout. Fraga demonstrates that this relationship is more complex, with significant variation across racial/ethnic groups. Moreover, he finds that socioeconomic status is particularly limited in its ability to explain *changes* in the turnout gap over time. This example is one of many in which Fraga highlights the need to update existing theories to better reflect a rapidly diversifying nation.

Perhaps most compellingly, after demonstrating observational support for his arguments, Fraga then tests for causality using panel data, treating the 2010 redistricting process as a natural experiment. Studying matched respondents who were all initially based in a district in which their racial/ethnic group was the electoral minority, he finds that the turnout gap significantly narrowed for those in the "treatment" group, in which individuals became the electoral majority after redistricting, in comparison with the "control" group, who remained in the electoral minority. Notably, this result is strongest for Blacks and Whites, with mixed results for Latinos. Fraga's findings about the importance of electoral influence even among White respondents connect to recent scholarship underscoring the need to take seriously the relationship between White identity, political behavior, and representation.

What can interested policymakers do to decrease the turnout gap? By Fraga's account, electoral institutions have had limited influence on the turnout gap. For example, focusing on the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA), he demonstrates that Black turnout began to increase *prior* to the legislation's passage. Similarly, the 1975 VRA expansion to include "language minorities" failed to increase Latino and Asian American turnout—though recent evidence suggests this may be changing. To be sure, the VRA was highly consequential for Black voters in the Deep South, and the region now has the smallest Black-White turnout gap. But Fraga's findings may ease some concerns of those preoccupied with the Supreme Court's gutting of the VRA in *Shelby County versus*

Holder (2013). Likewise, he demonstrates that policies such as felon disenfranchisement, photo identification laws, and institutional limitations on voting are not the main drivers of the turnout gap—though readers may find such policies objectionable on other grounds.

Fraga does highlight one institutional intervention positioned to ameliorate the turnout gap: redistricting. Structuring districts with group size in mind can provide marginalized groups with greater electoral influence. Yet, notably, the inverse may also be true—and the Supreme Court’s June 2019 ruling that federal courts do not have the authority to rule on cases of partisan gerrymandering raises new concerns, both about this practice and the persistence of the turnout gap.

While racial/ethnic groups are not monolithic, in Fraga’s account, factors such as group cohesion, a sense of shared group interests, and identity primacy among group members remain largely unexplored. He asserts that his theory may apply to any group that can reasonably be considered a voting bloc. But, questions remain about generalizability, including whether there is some minimum population threshold necessary to be considered as such. Indeed, the book’s evidence is somewhat more limited with respect to Asian Americans, a group that rarely approaches an electoral majority.

Yet, throughout the book, Fraga’s analysis is highly rigorous, and his evidence exceeds expectations. Indeed, this book would serve as an excellent teaching tool for an advanced Methods course. Fraga employs a wide range of techniques, including state and county-level mapping, panel data, nonparametric modeling, a difference-in-difference research design, and the natural experiment described above. With each choice, he carefully describes key details, explaining why a particular approach is best-suited for his analysis. For both its impressive substantive and methodological contributions, Fraga’s timely book is sure to make a significant impact.