Voting for Democracy: Chile's Plebiscito and the Electoral Participation of a Generation

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1. Motivation and Context
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Motivation

- How much does voting once affect the probability of voting again?
- If voting persistence exists, can it last a long time? Can it change electoral outcomes?
- How much can one very important, very salient election affect people's willingness to participate in future elections?
- Does any of this vary by gender, ideology, or educational attainment?
- Existing evidence is mostly limited to the USA and suffers from the problem of endogenous voter registration.

Chile's 1988 Plebiscito

- In 1980, Chile's authoritarian regime wrote a new constitution outlining a potential democratic transition.
- On October 5th 1988, the country voted on whether to extend the dictator's rule for 8 more years or hold presidential elections in 1989.
- The "No" option won with 56% of the vote, and pro-democracy candidate Patricio Aylwin was inaugurated as president in 1990.
- The *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia* was electorally dominant until 2010.

How did Voter Registration Work?

- Registration to vote was voluntary for eligible people, but voting was mandatory upon registration.
- The process started in February 1987 and was suddenly and unexpectedly closed on August 30th 1988.
- Citizens could only register upon turning 18 years old.
- The final electorate consisted of 7.4 million people, about 92% of the eligible population.
- Turnout for the plebiscito was 97.5%.

Identification Strategy

- The sharp cutoff date (birth on August 30^{th} 1970) for voter registration allows for a regression discontinuity setup.
- Comparing marginally eligible to marginally ineligible individuals will yield causal estimates if the identifying assumption is met.
- Identifying assumption: The only individual characteristic that changes discontinuously around the cutoff date is plebiscite eligibility.
- Because of the sudden announcement of registration closure, marginally eligible individuals very close to the cutoff had little time to register. Therefore, birth dates 8 weeks preceding the cutoff are dropped.

Compliance

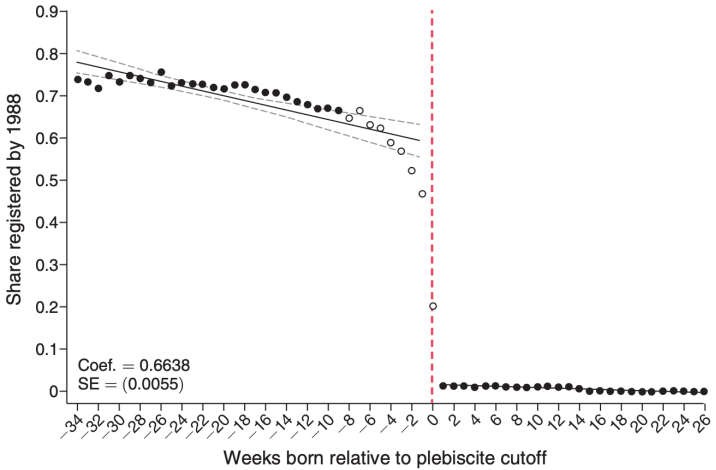


FIGURE 1. THE EFFECT OF PLEBISCITE ELIGIBILITY ON PLEBISCITE PARTICIPATION

Data & Outcomes of Interest

- Until the 2009 presidential election, voting remained mandatory for (voluntarily) registered citizens.
- Starting in the 2012 municipal elections, voter registration became automatic and voting was voluntary.
- Dataset consists of registration data until 2009, and turnout data in the 2012-2017 period.
- This allows testing of two different outcomes: Registration and turnout.
- The strategy consists of testing the difference in registration and turnout outcomes between marginally eligible and marginally ineligible individuals on downstream elections.

Regression Setup

$$Y_i^j = \alpha_k^j + \delta_k^j \cdot Before_{ik} + \mu_k^j \cdot Cutoff_{ik} + \gamma_k^j \cdot Cutoff_{ik} \times Before_{ik} + \varepsilon_{ik}^j$$

- $Before_{ik}$ is a binary variable that indicates if individual i turned 18 before the eligibility cutoff for election k.
- $Cutoff_{ik}$ is the distance, in weeks, to the cutoff for individual i in election k.
- Y_i^j is registration or turnout for individual i in election j.
- Bandwidth is 26 weeks (6 months) on either side of the cutoff.
- δ_k^j is the causal effect of marginal eligibility.

Main Result: $\hat{\delta}$ on Registration

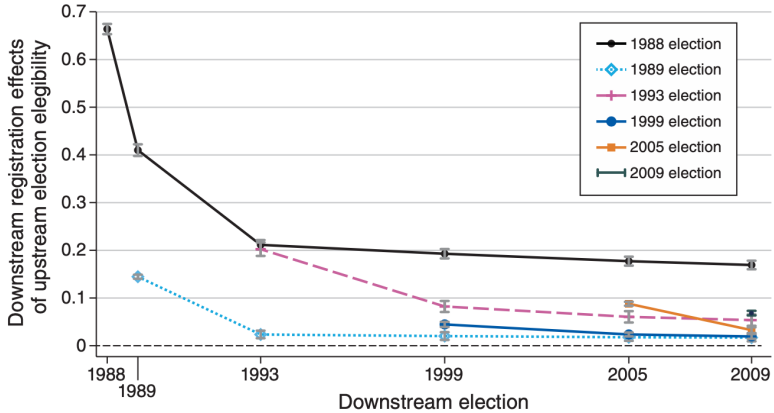


FIGURE 2. CONCURRENT AND DOWNSTREAM REGISTRATION EFFECTS OF UPSTREAM ELECTION ELIGIBILITY

Main Result: $\hat{\delta}$ on Turnout

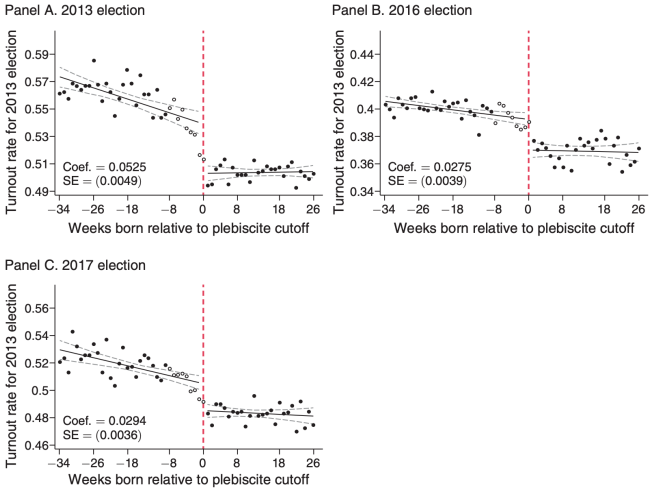


Figure 4. Differences in Downstream Election Turnout Rates across Plebiscite Eligibility Cutoff

What About Other Cutoffs?

TABLE 2—ESTIMATED EFFECTS OF UPSTREAM ELECTION ELIGIBILITY ON 2013, 2016, AND 2017 TURNOUT

	2013 election	2016 election	2017 election
Before × Plebiscite	0.0525	0.0275	0.0294
	(0.0049)	(0.0039)	(0.0036)
Before × 1989 Election	−0.0003	0.0050	0.0029
	(0.0030)	(0.0030)	(0.0037)
	[0.0000]	[0.0000]	[0.0000]
Before × 1993 Election	0.0135	0.0060	−0.0034
	(0.0040)	(0.0043)	(0.0043)
	[0.0000]	[0.0002]	[0.0000]
Before × 1999 Election	−0.0078	−0.0046	−0.0017
	(0.0029)	(0.0035)	(0.0035)
	[0.0000]	[0.0000]	[0.0000]
Before × 2005 Election	−0.0073	−0.0005	−0.0101
	(0.0046)	(0.0034)	(0.0034)
	[0.0000]	[0.0000]	[0.0000]
Before × 2009 Election	−0.0050	−0.0074	−0.0058
	(0.0047)	(0.0042)	(0.0041)
	[0.0000]	[0.0000]	[0.0000]
Observations	1,586,262	1,581,918	1,581,856

Heterogeneity by Educational Attainment (1)

TABLE 5—HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS OF UPSTREAM ELECTION ELIGIBILITY BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

	Initial registration			2009 registration		
	HS dropouts (1)	HS grad. (2)	>HS grad. (3)	HS dropouts (4)	HS grad. (5)	>HS grad. (6)
Panel A. 1988 plebiscite						
Before	0.449	0.529	0.558	0.168	0.157	0.125
	(0.019)	(0.011)	(0.006)	(0.010)	(0.004)	(0.007)
Control mean	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.601	0.688	0.774
Observations	61,687	92,092	27,593	61,687	92,092	27,593
Panel B. 1989 election						
Before	0.053	0.085	0.169	-0.011	0.012	0.039
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.006)	(0.008)
Control mean	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.580	0.660	0.723
Observations	63,286	98,873	31,549	63,286	98,873	31,549
Panel C. 1993 election						
Before	0.085	0.135	0.200	0.020	0.045	0.071
	(0.017)	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Control mean	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.323	0.378	0.505
Observations	54,416	99,126	36,959	54,416	99,126	36,959

Heterogeneity by Educational Attainment (2)

Panel D. 1999 election						
Before	0.008	0.009	0.059	0.022	0.017	0.012
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.003)	(0.008)
Control mean	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.185	0.236	0.388
Observations	47,421	121,034	48,213	47,421	121,034	48,213
Panel E. 2005 election						
Before	0.014	0.035	0.116	0.005	0.011	0.060
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.009)
Control mean	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.066	0.103	0.215
Observations	28,074	132,316	57,646	28,074	132,316	57,646
Panel F. 2009 election						
Before	0.010	0.047	0.063	0.010	0.047	0.063
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.008)	(0.007)
Control mean	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Observations	35,805	174,064	7,373	35,805	174,064	7,373

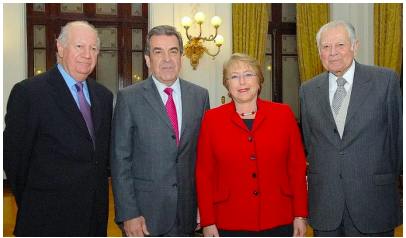
Heterogeneity by Allende Support

TABLE 4—HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS OF PLEBISCITE ELIGIBILITY BY PARTISANSHIP: ALLENDE SUPPORT

	1988 plebiscite	2009 registration	2013 election	2016 election	2017 election
Before	0.662	0.170	0.052	0.031	0.029
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Before × Allende %	−0.055	0.061	0.106	0.001	0.034
	(0.035)	(0.042)	(0.048)	(0.053)	(0.052)
Observations	226,255	226,255	226,255	225,273	224,809

Conclusions

- Voters in the 1988 plebiscite were significantly more likely to be registered to vote by 2009, and significantly more likely to vote in all elections by 2017.
- The effects are relatively stronger for less-educated individuals.
- The large and long-lasting consequences of the salience of the plebiscite probably contributed to 20 years of electoral success by the winning coalition.



Chile's 2022 Constitutional Referendum

- With many differences, parallels can be drawn between the 1988 plebiscite and the 2022 constitutional referendum.
- Both were, for millions of Chileans, their first time voting; both were important and salient political events; both featured a high degree of polarisation and mobilisation.
- The parallels beg the question about whether that referendum will significantly affect subsequent elections.
- Crucial difference: Until further notice, voting remains mandatory for all Chileans.