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# Why Does Sweden Have Higher Levels of Voter Turnout Than Finland?

## **Abstract**

Voter turnout is considered the “canary in the coal mine” when it comes to assessing the health of civic participation in a democracy; low turnout in particular is indicative of broader problems. Although voter turnout is quite high in both Sweden and Finland, turnout is notably higher in Sweden despite a long list of similarities between the two countries. Why is there this puzzling discrepancy? This paper employs a “most similar systems” research design to consider a wide variety of factors that can affect voter turnout and ultimately concludes that the difference lies in several different features of the two countries’ electoral systems. These features include the method used to translate votes into seats, constituency size, the number of political parties, type of ballot used, and presence or absence of compulsory voting laws.

## **Keywords**

Sweden, Finland, voter turnout, electoral system

## **Disciplines**

Comparative Politics

## **Comments**

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Why Does Sweden Have Higher Levels of Voter Turnout Than Finland?

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When it comes to elections and government, Sweden and Finland seem relatively similar on the surface. Both Scandinavian countries are in the top ten in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for voter turnout, both have automatic voter registration, neither has compulsory voting, both use some form of proportional representation (PR) in their legislative elections, both have multiparty systems (Desilver 2016), and both have undergone fairly significant governmental changes—including changing electoral systems and outright independence—in the last century (Särilvik 2002, 247-254; Sundberg 2002, 67-68). However, Sweden has a 10-18 percentage point higher voter turnout than Finland. In their most recent elections—2014 and 2015 respectively—Swedish turnout was at roughly 82% of the voting age population and 86% of registered voters, while Finnish turnout was at roughly 72% and 68% (Desilver 2016). Despite their similarities, why is there a difference in turnout between Sweden and Finland? The answer lies in the two countries' electoral systems; they both use PR, but not the same type (Särilvik 2002, 252-253; Sundberg 2002, 85). The most important factors in explaining why Sweden has higher voter turnout than Finland are the differences in their electoral systems.

Voter turnout itself is important, regardless of which election(s) and/or country/countries. The act of voting serves as an indicator of political participation, and turnout is frequently used as an indicator of overall political participation. It is both “the most common form of political activity” and, at least in theory, the most equal—one person has one vote, regardless of other factors. In fact, many political scientists see low voter turnout as the “canary in the coal mine” indicating a more serious issue within the population. In addition, the people who vote are the ones making some kind of decision on what the makeup of their country's government will be. Lower turnout means fewer people are making this decision, and the resulting government is less

representative of the country's population in general. Higher turnout leads to the reverse: more people making decisions and a more representative government (Jackman and Miller 2004, 137-138).

However, voter turnout differs from country to country. Assuming voter turnout is indicative of broader political participation, some countries have more people participating politically than others. These differences are quite important: some countries end up having less representative governments than others (Jackman and Miller 2004, 137-138). And these differences can be drastic. While Sweden and Finland have differences in turnout of ten to twenty percentage points, voter turnout varies more drastically worldwide. Turnout in Belgium is over 80%, while turnout in the United States is just under 55% (Desilver 2016). Given these sometimes drastic differences, asking why such differences exist is very important. If a person or country wants to know how to increase voter turnout somewhere, or just why their voter turnout is where it is, they need to know what factors lead to higher (or lower) turnout.

There are a lot of factors that can influence voter turnout, and political scientists have studied many of them. For example, three of the five OECD countries with the highest levels of voter turnout have compulsory voting laws, which require registered voters to actually vote or face some sort of penalty. And they do have a noticeable impact on turnout. Chile, an OECD member country, had a compulsory voting law up until 2012. In the election prior to abandoning compulsory voting, turnout was at 87% of registered voters, while turnout in the first election without compulsory voting was only 46%. Another factor that can influence voter turnout is the presence (or absence) of some kind of automatic voter registration. Automatic voter registration shifts the responsibility for registering to vote from the eligible voter to the government. The presence or absence of automatic registration happens to lead to similar—or different, if there is

no automatic registration—turnout percentages between eligible voters and registered voters. This impacts turnout more in terms of making it easier to measure, since the two numbers are closer together (Desilver 2016).

James Endersby and Jonathan Kriekhaus mention automatic voter registration in the context of their article arguing that electoral systems impact voter turnout. Based on their study of countries around the world, they argue that the type of electoral system a country possesses does influence its level of voter turnout, but only under certain circumstances. When considering level of democracy, electoral systems have a greater effect on turnout in fully democratic countries than less democratic countries. They also matter less in new democracies, where voters have less experience with how their votes affect the election outcome. In terms of how one measures turnout, they argue that using voter turnout based on eligible voters rather than based on registered voters makes the effect of electoral systems stronger. In general though, they argue that electoral systems do influence voter turnout to some degree, with PR producing higher turnout than any type of system with single-member districts (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601-608).

In addition to arguments about voter turnout in PR systems in general versus plurality and majoritarian systems (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601), political scientists have also argued about the differences between types of PR. In their study of the differences in proportionality among different types of PR—with a focus on the one in use in South Africa, L van Eck, S.E. Visagie, and H.C. de Kock discuss the different types, including the d'Hondt method and the Sainte-Laguë method, and all of which they explain in detail. They argue that, between the two methods, the latter is actually slightly more proportional than the latter. However, this argument is contingent of the form of the Sainte-Laguë method being used. While the pure Sainte-Laguë

method is more proportional, the modified version is almost identical to the d'Hondt method, so the difference in proportionality depends on the variation of the system used (van Eck, Visagie, and de Kock 2005, 93-97).

Robert Jackman and Ross Miller also argue for the influence of electoral systems on voter turnout, but as one institution among the broader influence of institutions on voter turnout. In a chapter on institutions and voter turnout in their book Before Norms, they argue that institutions—and not cultural values—are the factors that influence voter turnout. The institutional factors they use are nationally competitive elections, electoral proportionality, the number of political parties, unicameralism in the legislature, and compulsory voting laws (or lack thereof). Three of the authors' institutional factors are influenced by the type of electoral system a country possesses: nationally competitive elections, electoral proportionality, and the number of political parties. The cultural factors that they analyzed include need for achievement and civic values. Where the institutional factors did turn out to have an impact on voter turnout—which depended on the type of electoral system in use, the cultural factors did not, regardless of the electoral system (Jackman and Miller 2004, 137-143, 154-162).

While the two previous pieces studied voter turnout in multiple countries (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601-608; Jackman and Miller 2004, 137-143, 154-162), Maciej Górecki focuses on Sweden specifically. In her article, she looks at the impact of election closeness and habit formation on voter turnout across sixteen Swedish elections between 1956 and 2006. Specifically, she is testing whether or not the electoral context an individual is exposed to when they first become eligible to vote matters when they establish a habit of voting/not voting. Górecki focuses on the election closeness aspect of electoral context because, she argues, it can change regardless of the change/consistency of other aspects, like a country's electoral system.

She concludes that, while electoral closeness has less of an impact on a high turnout country like Sweden, it does have a measurable impact on those who have been eligible to vote in fewer elections. Those individuals are more strongly affected by electoral context; if their initial experiences are in less close elections, then they are less likely to vote, and develop a habit of not voting (Górecki 2013, 234-236, 243-245).

Meanwhile, Mikael Persson, Hanna Wass, and Jenrik Oscarsson focus on the generational effect on turnout in their article, as seen through fifty years' worth of national election data from Sweden. The generational effect refers to the pattern of younger age groups showing lower voter turnout rates for longer, instead of consistently voting at higher rates as they grow older. As a result, overall voter turnout continues to decline over time. The authors try to account for what looks like a noticeable generational effect in their research by controlling for different institutional and individual factors, including level of political interest, proportion of party members in the electorate, effective number of parties, and election competitiveness. They conclude that controlling for the proportion of party members in the electorate and the effective number of political parties both reduce the generational effect, while controlling for level of political interest and election competitiveness has no impact on the generational effect (Persson, Wass, and Oscarsson 2013, 249-265).

Like Persson, Wass, and Oscarsson (Persson, Wass, and Oscarsson 2013, 249-265), Elisabeth Gidengil, Hanna Wass, and Maria Valaste focus on non-institutional factors, specifically parents' influence on whether or not their children vote. Specifically, they test two different theories—status transmission theory and social learning theory—based on data from Finland's 1999 parliamentary election. Status transmission theory argues that parents' socioeconomic status is key in their children's political involvement. Well-educated and/or high-



status parents tend to pass that status onto their children; the high status makes them more likely to vote. On the other hand, the social learning theory argues that children develop a tendency to vote (or not vote) based on watching whether or not their parents vote. The authors conclude that while parental education does have an impact on the child's voting by way of parental turnout and the child's level of education—according to status transmission theory—parental turnout is the more influential aspect, much like in social learning theory. Status transmission theory does not really work in Finland, where children tend to have higher education than their parents, but watching their parents vote (or not vote) has an impact on whether or not they vote (Gidengil, Wass, and Valaste 2016, 373-381).

In addition to studying various factors that can influence voter turnout, from electoral systems to the number of political parties and even the influence of parental voting habits on their children (Endersby and Kriechaus 2008, 601; Jackman and Miller 2004, 139-143; Gidengil, Wass, and Valaste 2016, 373), political scientists have also studied the histories of different countries' electoral systems. Jan Sundberg and Bo Särilvik have studied the histories of Finland's and Sweden's electoral systems, respectively. In the case of Finland, its electoral system has undergone no major changes since its creation in 1906 or since Finland gained its independence from Russia in 1917. Just like in 1906, Finland still uses a form of PR, a modified d'Hondt system, to elect its unicameral (one-house) legislature (Sundberg 2002, 67-68). Sweden, on the other hand, has changed its electoral system three times since it turned to an elected, bicameral (two-house) parliament in 1866. It used a majority/plurality system with some multimember constituencies and some single-member districts until 1911, when it switched to PR and the d'Hondt system. Sweden switched to its present modified Saint-Laguë system over two rounds in 1970, and abolished its bicameral parliament in favor of a unicameral one in 1969 (Särilvik 2002,

225-226, 252). While both countries now have PR and unicameral legislatures, they did not both start there.

Including the use of PR and the presence of unicameral legislatures, the similarities between Sweden and Finland make it fairly simple to focus on their electoral systems. First, both countries (since 1969) have unicameral legislatures (Sundberg 2002, 67-68; Särilvik 2002, 252). In Jackman and Miller's book chapter on institutions and voter turnout, they propose and prove that whether a country has a unicameral or bicameral legislature can affect voter turnout. They argue that in a unicameral system, the legislature has a more important role in legislation, making those elections more important and thereby increasing turnout (Jackman and Miller 2004, 142, 148-149). Since Sweden and Finland both have unicameral legislatures (Sundberg 2002, 67-68; Särilvik 2002, 252), this impact will not show up in the explanation of why Sweden has a higher voter turnout.

Both countries also use some form of proportional representation in their legislative elections (Sundberg 2002, 252-253; Särilvik 2002, 85). Proportional representation itself has an impact on voter turnout, but only under certain circumstances. One of these conditions includes strength/level of democracy. Electoral systems have a greater influence on voter turnout in fully democratic countries than in less democratic countries (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 606-608). According to the 2017 Freedom House index, which measures the level of democracy in countries around the world, both Sweden and Finland scored a 1—most free in the index's ratings system—in both political rights and civil liberties, essentially meaning both countries are fully democratic (Freedom House-Sweden, 2017; Freedom House-Finland 2017). Another democracy-related factor that has been argued to have an influence on the impact of electoral systems on voter turnout is the age of the democracy: younger democracies have had less

experience with how electoral systems work and older democracies have had more experience—and therefore, the electoral system has a greater impact. While this has been essentially proven false (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 607-608), the Swedish and Finnish democracies are both over one hundred years old (Sundberg 2002, 67-68; Särilvik 2002, 225-226), so if there is anything to this idea, it should not show up in the explanation regarding the difference in turnout between the two countries.

The presence or lack of compulsory voting laws has also been proven to have an effect on voter turnout. While they are not always enforced, they do have a significant, positive impact on voter turnout in the countries that have them (Jackman and Miller 2004, 143, 149). In the OECD, three of the five highest-turnout countries have compulsory voting laws. Additionally, Chile had a compulsory voting law until 2012, after which turnout among registered voters plummeted from 87% to 42%. Neither Sweden nor Finland have compulsory voting laws (Desilver 2016), so there is no chance of a compulsory voting-related turnout difference interfering with a comparison of their electoral systems.

Additionally, Sweden and Finland share a characteristic that actually takes care of some of a measurement problem regarding voter turnout. In their article on the influence of electoral institutions on voter turnout, James Endersby and Jonathan Kriekhaus mention automatic voter registration in the context of discussing how previous literature has measured voter turnout to begin with. They explained that previous studies trying to explain turnout have measured turnout in two different ways: as the percentage of registered voters and as the percentage of the voting age population. They argue that while the latter results in artificially low turnout because of ineligible individuals, using the percentage of registered voters has problems too. They argue that registering to vote is an indicator that an individual is more likely to vote and, therefore,

should not be left out of explanations of voter turnout. They also explain that automatic or mandatory registration mostly solves the problem of figuring out which measurement to use (Endersby and Krieckhaus 2008, 602-603). With automatic registration, one gets similar turnout numbers, regardless of whether one is referring to registered voters or the voting age population. Sweden and Finland both have automatic voter registration and four percentage point gaps between the two categories (Desilver 2016), thereby eliminating most of the previously mentioned measurement problem.

Sweden and Finland also have another similarity that both makes it easier to focus on just their electoral systems and actually eliminates a possible explanation for the difference in turnout between them. Both countries are technically high turnout countries, meaning they have high levels of voter turnout (Desilver 2016). In the Persson, Wass, and Oscarsson article on the generational effect on voter turnout in Swedish elections, the authors noted that the generational effect only has a moderate impact in Sweden because it is a high turnout country. In the process of making their argument, they also pointed out that the same argument applied to Finland (Persson, Wass, and Oscarsson 2013, 252, 264-265). Given that the generational effect has a similar effect in both countries, it should not account for much, if any, of the difference in voter turnout between the two. The two countries' similarity in this regard more or less ensures that the turnout difference is not actually explained by the generational effect, instead of the two countries' electoral systems.

While a previous paragraph pointed out that automatic voter registration mostly eliminates gaps in turnout between eligible and registered voters, there is still a potential problem with the gaps in Sweden and Finland. In Sweden, the percent turnout of registered voters in the most recent election is 86%, four points higher than the turnout for the voting age population.

However, the percent turnout for the voting age population in Finland is actually four points higher at 72% than the turnout for registered voters at 68% (Desilver 2016). This gap could be explained by Finland's lack of a requirement that voters actually reside in Finland. All Finnish citizens who meet the age requirement can vote, including those who live abroad. Jan Sundberg has pointed out that most of these individuals do not vote, which depresses voter turnout among the country's voting age population (Sundberg 2002, 80). However, since both countries' use of automatic voter registration eliminates most of the measurement problem with using the percent turnout of registered voters (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 602-603), the turnout for registered voters will be used to study the effects of the two countries' electoral systems on turnout in order to avoid the aforementioned problem.

In the comparison between voter turnout in Sweden and Finland, the turnout data from the most recent elections—2014 and 2015, respectively (Desilver 2016)—will be used. In order to avoid the peculiarity in Finland's turnout gap between registered voters and the voting age population (Sundberg 2002, 80), the percentages for turnout of registered voters will be used. This comes to 68% for Finland and 86% for Sweden (Desilver 2016). While this would essentially control for at least some of the difference in turnout elsewhere, because citizens who actually register to vote are already more likely to vote, both Sweden and Finland have automatic voter registration, which mostly eliminates this problem (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 602-603; Desilver 2016). As far as the definition of an electoral system is concerned, the analysis will be done based on the two countries' PR systems and the party systems they produce. Since electoral systems impact—and technically include—both the proportionality of translating votes into seats and how many political parties a country ends up with (Jackman and Miller 2004, 137, 148), differences in both between the two countries will be taken into account. Size of

constituencies and type of ballot used also constitute part of a country's electoral system (European Parliament 2016, 1-4), so these will be taken into account as well.

While Sweden and Finland both use PR, they use two different types of PR, which use slightly different methods to translate seats into votes. Since 1970, Sweden has used the modified Sainte-Laguë method with party lists over two rounds of allocating the 349 seats in their unicameral legislature. 310 of these seats are allocated in the first round, and the other 39 are allocated in the second round. In the first round, the 310 seats—spread across 29 constituencies—are allocated proportionally within their respective constituency to all parties that have reached at least 12% of the vote in the constituency. In the second round, the modified Sainte-Laguë method is applied to the total national vote for all parties which have received at least 4% of the national vote. This round is meant to figure out how many total seats a party is entitled to nationally. If the total number of seats out of the 310 from the first round is less than a party's national vote total entitles it to, it receives seats out of the remaining 39 to correct this (Särilvik 2002, 252-253).

The modified Sainte-Laguë method itself takes the total number of votes received by each party that has reached the threshold in a constituency and divides that number by a divisor based on the number of seats a party has won so far times two plus one (divisor =  $2x+1$ ). The modified part, which is also used by Denmark, makes the first divisor 1.4. After the parties' votes are divided by 1.4, the party with the highest resulting number gets the first seat. Then, the party's original vote total is divided by 3 until its resulting number is the highest again, and the divisor becomes 5 and the process starts again. The divisor for any party's total number of votes only increases when they end up with the highest resulting number (and a/another seat) (van Eck, Visagie, de Kock 2005, 95-96). For Sweden, this process works the same way in both rounds; the

only difference is that in the second round, the national vote totals are used (Särilvik 2002, 252-253).

Despite repeated proposals to switch to the modified Sainte-Laguë method, Finland has used the d'Hondt method with party lists since 1906. The two hundred seats in the unicameral Finnish legislature are allocated among its set constituencies according to population. Within each constituency, the d'Hondt method is used over one round to allocate its seats among the parties that received votes (Sundberg 2002, 72, 85-87). Under this method, the number of votes each party receives is divided by the number of seats the party has already received plus one. The party with the highest average as a result of the division gets the seat, the party with the next highest average gets the next seat, and the process continues until all the seats in a constituency have been allocated (European Parliament 2016, 3-4). Finland has no official electoral threshold, and this method tends to give an advantage to large parties in small districts with few representatives and small parties in large districts with many representatives. In addition, Finland's electoral system permits electoral alliances among parties, which are then considered one party when seats are being allocated (Sundberg 2002, 85-88).

While the d'Hondt method and the modified Sainte-Laguë method are both types of proportional representation—and therefore at least somewhat more proportional than plurality or majoritarian systems (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601)—many believe the modified Sainte-Laguë method is actually slightly more proportional than the d'Hondt method. The d'Hondt method tends to reinforce the advantage parties with high vote totals get when seats are allocated, at the expense of smaller parties (European Parliament 2016, 4). Particularly in districts with fewer representatives, the disproportionality can be higher (Sundberg 2002, 88). However, no method for allocation seats on the basis of votes received is perfectly proportional,

since it is impossible to allocate part of a seat (European Parliament 2016, 4). In fact, some have argued that there is actually no real difference between the d'Hondt method and the modified Sainte-Laguë method. For them, the initial division of vote totals by 1.4 in the modified Sainte-Laguë method puts it on the same track as the d'Hondt method in terms of seat allocation. In this case, only the pure form of the Sainte-Laguë method, which starts with an initial divisor of 1, is noticeably more proportional than the d'Hondt method (van Eck, Visagie, de Kock 2005, 94-96). Regardless of whether or not there is actually a difference though, people who want to shift to the modified Sainte-Laguë method use the argument that it is more proportional when they make their argument (Sundberg 2002, 77).

However, Sweden and Finland not only use different types of PR, but they use them differently, which might account for something. Sweden uses the modified Sainte-Laguë method over two rounds of seat allocation for a grand total of 349 seats, while Finland uses the d'Hondt method over one round for a total of 200 seats. For each, the first round allocates seats among parties within districts (Sundberg 2002, 72, 85-87; Särilvik 2002, 252-253). This results in either a slightly less proportional allocation in Finland than Sweden (European Parliament 2016, 4) or no measureable difference (van Eck, Visagie, de Kock 2005, 95), depending on which argument about the different methods is accurate. However, Sweden has a second round of vote allocation designed to ensure that the country's political parties receive a number of seats as proportional to the number of votes they receive as possible (Särilvik 2002, 253).

With the total number of seats each party has received among all the districts in mind, the second round of allocation takes each party's national vote total and uses the modified Sainte-Laguë method to calculate how many seats each party should have nationally. If this number is larger than the number of seats a party has actually received, then they receive more seats from



among the 39 seats allocated in the second round to get the numbers closer together. If a party has somehow received more seats than this second round shows that they are entitled to, they do not receive more seats, nor do they lose seats. Parties that have not reached the 4% threshold for the national vote do not receive more seats, but they do keep their seats in districts where they have won more than 12% of the vote. This second round is intended to iron out as much of any national-level disproportionality that exists as possible (Särilvik 2002, 252-253). Finland's electoral system possesses no such method for mitigating disproportionality on the national level (Sundberg 2002, 85-87), leaving it with no way of correcting any amount of the disproportionality that exists in all electoral systems (European Parliament 2016, 4).

While the Finnish electoral system possesses no method for correcting any disproportionality between votes a party gets and seats it receives, it does offer parties a way to get around some of the biases in its electoral system. The Finnish electoral system allows parties to form electoral alliances, which can offer smaller parties a better chance at getting seats in a system that gives larger parties an advantage. In an electoral alliance, the parties involved essentially run as one larger party, pooling both resources and voters to maximize the number of seats they receive. They try to avoid competing with each other; instead, they run candidates in different districts and encourage their supporters to vote for each other's candidates. This way, they can try to get some of the advantages reserved for larger parties under the d'Hondt method without actually being a larger party. Electoral alliances generally only last for the duration of the election; the parties usually go back to being separate parties immediately after the election (Sundberg 2002, 85-86).

While the presence in both the Swedish and Finnish electoral systems of mechanisms for mitigating disproportionality in the translation of votes into seats (Särilvik 2002, 252-253;

Sundberg 2002, 85-87) might sound like it should render both systems equally proportional—rendering electoral system differences irrelevant in accounting for the difference in voter turnout (Endersby and Krieckhaus 2008, 601-602) between Sweden and Finland, that is not the case. Sweden’s second round of seat allocation does not require the competing political parties to do anything particularly out of the ordinary. They just have to get more than 4% of the vote nationally to be eligible for extra seats—provided, of course, they meet the 12% vote threshold for constituencies and receive any seats to begin with (Särilvik 2002, 253). In Finland, the parties have to form electoral alliances to have a chance at getting the benefits the Finnish system gives larger parties. If a party cannot form an electoral alliance, they do not get those advantages (Sundberg 2002, 85-87). Parties need to do extra work to gain the advantages offered by Finland’s mechanism, and they do not like to do so unless they are sure they will get something out of it—which an electoral alliance does not guarantee (Jackman and Miller 2004. 137-138; Sundberg 2002), 85-87.

Electoral systems, however, are not just how seats are translated into votes. Electoral systems also involve party systems. Proportional representation systems tend to produce multiparty systems, which provide voters with more options, while SMP (single-member plurality) systems tend to produce two parties at most. Parties in a PR system also have an incentive to be more spread out ideologically because they know voters have more options, while parties in SMP systems have an incentive to move toward the ideological center. With more parties to choose from, voters in PR systems like Sweden and Finland are more likely to have a party they strongly agree with and/or one they strongly disagree with, which makes them more likely to vote—and increases voter turnout. The opposite is true in SMP systems (Jackman and Miller 2004, 137-140).

However, multiparty systems—and by extension, PR systems—are not perfect. More parties do give voters more options, but too many parties is not exactly a good thing. The presence of more parties in an election can make it more likely that no party will have enough seats in the legislature to form a government on its own. Without a majority, parties have to form coalitions—essentially alliances in the government—in order to govern, and voters have no say in the formation of these coalitions. In this case, the election is less important in the selection of a government. If the necessity for forming a coalition takes place frequently enough, it makes having a say in the makeup of the government harder for the voters. With elections less important to government formation, people have less incentive to vote. So, past a certain number of parties, voter turnout can actually go down due to frequent coalition governments (Jackman and Miller 2004, 141-142, 148).

Since its independence from Russia in 1917, Finland has had many coalition governments. Over 67 cabinets/governments have been formed since 1917, and nearly all of them have been coalition governments. Finland's electoral system has ended up producing a party system without any kind of dominant party. The parties around which the coalition governments have been built have changed from time to time. However, the country's six main parties have been in existence since the beginning, with the number of smaller parties rising and falling over time. Today, Finland has ten political parties, making the party system more fragmented than before, when it had fewer parties. Between the relatively large number of parties and the frequent formation of coalition governments (Sundberg 2002, 91, 68, 86), voter turnout in Finland should be lower because these factors make elections less important, which gives people less of an incentive to vote (Jackman and Miller 2004, 141-142).

Since it established a unicameral legislature in 1969 and switched to its current electoral system at the same time, Sweden has not had terribly frequent coalition governments, but they have had several minority governments—single-party governments where the governing party has a plurality of seats but not a majority, and does not elect to form a coalition. This has been attributed to both Sweden’s electoral system and a decline in support for the previously dominant Social Democrats. Additionally, minority governments do require a measure of cooperation with other parties in the legislature to keep the government in position. However, they do not involve as much compromise. Sweden also has a six/seven party system, but these parties have been relatively consistent. While Sweden could be considered to have too many parties (Särilvik 2002, 252-259), its lack of frequent coalition governments and smaller number of parties compared to Finland (Sundberg 2002, 86) does mean that legislative elections matter more in terms of government formation, giving people greater incentive to vote in them—which should raise turnout levels (Jackman and Miller 2004, 141-142).

In addition, Sweden’s electoral system also includes an electoral threshold, a percent of the total vote a party has to reach in order to qualify for seats. For Sweden, this number is at 12% of the vote in a constituency or 4% of the national vote (Särilvik 2002, 252-253). The electoral threshold was set in 1969/1970, at the same time as the establishment of the unicameral legislature and the addition of a second round of seat allocation, with the intention of preventing certain smaller parties—the Communists—from gaining seats in the legislature. While the threshold has failed to keep the Communists out, it does appear to have accomplished something else: the prevention of a relatively large number of small parties getting into the legislature and causing instability (Särilvik 2002, 252-260). Finland, on the other hand, has no electoral threshold whatsoever, and the Finnish party system has more (smaller) parties and more instability. This

has led to more frequent coalition governments (Sundberg 2002, 85-86, 91), which can lead to less important elections and lower voter turnout (Jackman and Miller 2004, 141-142).

In addition to the method by which votes are translated into seats and a country's party system, the size of a country's constituencies is also part of their electoral system—and therefore can have an impact on their voter turnout (European Parliament 2016, 5). Political scientists have shown that district magnitude, or the size of a constituency/number of representatives it has, has an impact on the proportionality of a country's electoral system (Sundberg 2002, 87-88)—which impacts voter turnout (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601-602). Small magnitude districts are less proportional than larger ones. Finland's constituencies vary widely in terms of district magnitude, with some smaller (and less proportional) and others larger (and more proportional). Overall, though, disproportionality has increased (Sundberg 2002, 85-90), which should contribute to lower voter turnout because of lower proportionality (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601-602).

On the other hand, overall disproportionality has remained consistently low in Sweden over the last forty years. Disproportionality declined noticeably when the country added a second round of seat allocation to its electoral system in 1969/1970, and has neither increased nor decreased significantly since (Särilvik 2002, 239). Disproportionality in Sweden is also significantly lower than it is in Finland (Särilvik 2002, 239; Sundberg 2002, 86). Since lower disproportionality is associated with the electoral system in question being more proportional, it serves as an incentive for people to vote because their votes are more likely to translate more directly into seats. Since the system is more proportional, people see it as more fair and are more likely to vote (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601-602). So, since Sweden has lower overall

disproportionality than Finland (Särilvik 2002, 239; Sundberg 2002, 86), it makes sense that the former would have higher voter turnout than the latter (Desilver 2016).

In addition to the method of translating votes into seats, party system, and the size of constituencies, the type of ballot a country uses is also part of its electoral system (European Parliament 2016, 4-5). Sweden uses open party lists with the opportunity for voters to give a “personal preference vote” to a specific candidate within the list they vote for (Särilvik 2002, 260-261). Party lists in general fit into PR systems in that voters in PR systems are voting for parties and the representatives that ultimately occupy the seats the party gets are the individuals on these lists. Open party lists simply mean that voters can see the candidates on the list (Jackman and Miller 2004, 139-140). The personal preference vote in Sweden has the potential to override a party’s ordering of candidates on its list in a given constituency. If the personal preference votes for a candidate total at least 8% of the party’s total vote, that candidate’s name gets moved to the top of the list, making them first in line for a seat (Särilvik 2002, 260-261). This provides voters with the opportunity to have a more direct say in what their government looks like, which has been proven to help increase voter turnout (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601-602).

Finland, on the other hand, uses candidate preference voting instead of party lists, and has since 1953. While referred to as “single member lists” they are not lists at all. Instead, voters choose from among individual candidates representing parties. Votes for a given candidate are then counted toward the party or electoral alliance that the candidate represents (Sundberg 2002, 77). While this does give voters a greater say in what their government looks like in terms of choosing specific people—which has been proven to increase voter turnout (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601-602)—it is not without its problems. In a PR system, this has the potential

to increase intra-party competition and party fragmentation (Särilvik 2002, 262). Increased fragmentation can lead to too many options for voters which, in a system where coalition governments are frequent, can depress voter turnout because elections are less important to government formation (Jackman and Miller 2004, 147-149). Unfortunately for Finland, it fits all of these requirements (Sundberg 2002, 85-86, 91), so lower turnout in Finland compared to Sweden should be no surprise.

There is one more important factor in evaluating Sweden's and Finland's electoral systems and whether or not the differences between the two can explain why Sweden has an 18 percentage point higher voter turnout among registered voters than Finland (Desilver 2016). As has been previously argued regarding PR systems in general, proportional representation encourages people to vote because they see it as a fair system that will better represent their votes in the legislature. Here, perception is key. If people do not perceive a system as fair or likely to represent them sufficiently, then they are less likely to vote. The same general idea is true of electoral systems in countries with different levels of democracy: people believe elections are less important—and less fair in general—in less democratic countries, so a more representative system like PR has less of an impact on voter turnout (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601-603, 606-607).

While political scientists are fairly consistent in the belief that PR systems in general are more proportional—and encourage higher voter turnout—than other types of electoral system (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601-602; Jackman and Miller 2004, 137-140), there is less agreement when it comes to types of PR. Between the two main types, the Sainte-Laguë method and the d'Hondt method, there is no agreement regarding which one is more proportional. Some political scientists argue that the Sainte-Laguë method, modified or not, is the more proportional

of the two (European Parliament 2016, 4; Sundberg 2002, 85). Others, meanwhile, argue that the Sainte-Laguë method is only more proportional than the d'Hondt method in its pure form and that the modified Saint-Laguë method—used by Sweden and Denmark, among others—is essentially identical to the d'Hondt method in proportionality (van Eck, Visagie, and de Kock 2005, 95; Sundberg 2002, 85).

However, voters and the politicians making decisions about what a country's electoral system will look like do not necessarily see things the same way. How voters perceive a system, regardless of whether their perception is correct or not, is an important factor in whether or not they vote (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601-602). And voters—and politicians—in Sweden and Finland definitely have opinions about their own, and each other's, electoral systems (Särilvik 2002, 247-249; Sundberg 2002, 77). In the case of Sweden, these perceptions resulted in a switch to the modified Sainte-Laguë method—from the d'Hondt method—in 1952 (Särilvik 2002, 247-249). Finland, meanwhile, has maintained its use of the d'Hondt method since 1906, despite complaints from smaller parties (Sundberg 2002, 67-68, 76-77).

When Sweden made the switch to the modified Sainte-Laguë method in 1952, it did so in order to render the formation of potentially problematic electoral cartels/alliances unnecessary for the Agrarian Union (later the Center Party) and other smaller parties like it. What the Agrarian Union and its coalition partner in government, the Social Democrats, wanted was a system that was more favorable to small parties than the d'Hondt method. So, they proposed a switch to the modified Sainte-Laguë method, with the idea that its use of only odd-number divisors would make it more proportional to smaller parties like the Agrarian Union. The parties involved in making this decision saw the Sainte-Laguë method as the more proportional of the two. The parties were also well aware that proportional representation had become ingrained in



Sweden's political culture, so trying for a less proportional system was out of the question on the grounds that the voters would not like it. The same logic was also at work in 1969/1970 when Sweden added a second round of seat allocation—voters like proportionality, so more proportionality is a good thing (Särilvik 2002, 247-254).

Smaller parties in Finland have been making a very similar argument ever since the country adopted the d'Hondt method in 1906. The ongoing discussion in the Finnish legislature has always included trying to increase the proportionality of the country's electoral system. Small parties have always complained that the d'Hondt method puts them at a disadvantage in terms of the translation of votes to seats and have proposed changes running from switching to the Sainte-Laguë method to changing the number of constituencies. For example, one of Finland's political parties, the Swedish People's Party, repeatedly proposed a switch to the Sainte-Laguë method in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, having seen such changes occurring elsewhere in Scandinavia (including Sweden). However, the proposals were defeated by larger parties worried about fragmentation and their own shares of votes and seats. Seeing parties argue about the country's electoral system must have had some kind of effect on Finnish voters; they are essentially being told that their electoral system is not as proportional as the Sainte-Laguë method (Sundberg 2002, 73, 76-77). And a negative perception of the electoral system leads to lower turnout in the country in question (Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008, 601-602).

Regardless of how it is measured, the difference in voter turnout between Sweden and Finland is noticeable: 10 percentage points among the voting age populations and 18 percentage points among registered voters (Desilver 2016). Given that voter turnout is the "canary in the coal mine" of broader political participation (Jackman and Miller 2004, 137), it is certainly worth asking why Sweden has higher levels of voter turnout than Finland. The similarities between the

two countries both make them excellent subjects for comparison and eliminate several potential explanations for differences in turnout. Both use some form of proportional representation to allocate seats in their legislatures, both have unicameral legislatures, neither has compulsory voting, both have multiparty systems, both have automatic voter registration, both have undergone significant changes in their governments in the last century (Särilvik 2002, 252-253; Sundberg 2002, 67, 72-73), and both are classified as high-turnout countries (Persson, Wass, and Oscarsson 2013, 252, 264-265).

What the two countries do not have in common—and what best accounts for their different levels of voter turnout—are the details of their electoral systems. Sweden uses the modified Sainte-Laguë method over two rounds of seat allocation with open party lists and the opportunity to indicate candidate preference, and has a multiparty system of 6-7 parties and fairly low disproportionality (Särilvik 2002, 252-253, 259-261). Finland, meanwhile, uses the arguably less proportional d'Hondt system over a single round with candidate preference voting, possess a multiparty system of around 10 parties, and has considerably higher disproportionality than Sweden (Sundberg 2002, 85-87, 77; Särilvik 2002, 239).

Both disproportionality and exceptionally high numbers of parties have been found to depress voter turnout (Jackman and Miller 2004, 147-149). Sweden, meanwhile, possesses a second round of seat allocation designed to do what the Finnish system cannot: eliminate most (if not all) of the disproportionality in the first round (Särilvik 2002, 252-253). In the end, however, parties and voters in both countries are more or less in agreement in how proportional the two electoral systems are. Sweden's electoral system is seen as more proportional (Särilvik 2002, 252-253; Sundberg 2002, 76-77), and when people see a system as more proportional, they are more likely to vote—and voter turnout goes up (Endersby and Krieckhaus 2008, 601-602).

Given the extent of what is included in an electoral system—the formula used to translate votes into seats, constituency size, number of political parties, type of ballot used, and presence or absence of compulsory voting laws (Jackman and Miller 2004, 137-140; European Parliament 2016, 4-5)—it is highly likely that the differences between Sweden’s and Finland’s electoral systems is the biggest factor in Sweden having a higher voter turnout compared to Finland.

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