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The Higher Principle? An Attempt to Develop a Near Universal Approach to Explaining Voter Turnout through Micro-Macro Interactions

Abstract: Over the past decade, several authors have tried to explain why people participate in elections by examining both direct and contingent effects of diverse sets of factors. While the direct effects follow a simple logic that some independent variable directly affects turnout, contingent effects work on the assumption that the influence of one explanatory variable differs across varying levels of another explanatory variable. In the previous research, the existence of latter effects has been justified on the basis of more or less convincing stories. An attempt is made here to provide a more general framework, stemming from the question, “At what moment do representative democracies achieve political equality?” From this starting point, the article introduces a near universal approach for understanding contingent effects in voter turnout theory and for developing various hypotheses that may be tested using multilevel models that include cross-level interaction.

Keywords: voter turnout, cross-level interaction, multilevel modelling, political equality hypothesis, higher principle

Introduction

When attempting to explain why people are politically active, context matters. The impact of one explanatory variable may depend upon levels of another and that is why... A stream of papers, starting with the seminal work of Anduiza Perea (2002), has made an effort to develop stories about the interdependence among the determinants of voter turnout at the micro and macro levels of analysis (Anderson 2007; Gallego 2010; Rocha et al. 2010; Quintelier et al. 2011; Söderlund et al. 2011; Singh 2011a; Kittilson and Anderson 2011; Jusko and Shively 2005). These papers’ potential to explain voter turnout better than previous work that often omitted one of these two levels is unquestionable. It even appears that scholars capable of utilizing multilevel modelling and interaction effects¹ have gained entrée onto an almost limitless landscape of ever more novel, ever more complex relationships. In light of such opportunity, nobody can be surprised that some of these researchers have been rewarded by publication in the leading scientific journals.

¹ In the field of voter turnout, we have witnessed an expansion of academic papers based on multilevel modelling. See Buhlmann and Freitag (2006), Fieldhouse et al. (2007), Pacheco (2008), Cutts and Fieldhouse (2009), Birch (2010), Gallego (2010), Freitag and Stadelmann-Steffen (2010), Hadjar and Beck (2010), Jacobs and Spierings (2010), Rocha et al. (2010), Chen (2011), Kittilson and Anderson (2011), Quintelier et al. (2011), Singh (2011a), Singh (2011b), Soderlund et al. (2011), Carreras and Castaneda-Angarita (2013), etc. However, only a few models proposed in these papers include the requisite interaction terms for testing contingent effects.

But, as I believe, all this research has succeeded in overlooking a common denominator that might structure the vast majority of these stories about the contingent effects of the individual and contextual determinants of voter turnout. This paper strives to highlight that there can be a straightforward, near universal mechanism that controls these effects, regardless of the particular variables under analysis. Since the aim of the article is to introduce this mechanism, the paper will differentiate itself from earlier descriptions by offering a more general perspective on how researchers may approach contingent effects in voter turnout theory. To this, however, it is worth mentioning that although this near universal mechanism has remained undiscovered in the previous literature, I show below that the researchers have made intuitive use of it.

This mechanism will be derived in what follows from the normative debates on political equality (Lijphart 1997; Pateman 1970). Scholars such as Arend Lijphart have emphasized that political equality in contemporary representative democracies primarily depends upon voter turnout levels (see also Tingsten 1937: 230; Schattschneider 1960; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003: 238; Persson et al. 2013; cf. Sinnott and Achen 2008; Flavin 2012). When turnout tends toward 100% (for example, because of compulsory voting laws), it implies that people of all kinds go to the polls in equal proportions: the rich and the poor, the young and the old, those highly educated and those never schooled. Satisfied citizens also vote to the same degree as those who are discontent, and the same is true when it comes to level of interest in politics. When everyone votes, the probability is high that no one voice will be heard to the exclusion of others and that the government will act in a way that reflects many contending interests in society (cf. Rosema 2007).

By contrast, when participation at the polls is less than perfect, patterns of inequality among citizens can arise. Many studies have found that some types of people are less inclined to cast a ballot than others (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Campbell et al. 1960; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba et al. 1995; Topf 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003), and therefore, most Western democracies share the problem of unequal participation.² The result is that some interests remain underrepresented within legislative bodies, leading to suboptimal allocation of resources within society. Since some people have more obstacles to overcome the cost of voting, it seems that citizens' equal power to influence the government guaranteed by the law holds only in a formal sense, but not in actual practice. Lijphart (1997) points to this as a deep-seated dilemma for democracy that should be resolved³ (see also Schlozman et al. 2012; cf. Highton and Wolfinger 2001).

Notions such as these will be useful in deriving a near universal approach for hypothesizing about how individual and contextual determinants of turnout can interact. In the next section, the ties between voter turnout and political equality will lead to specification of the political equality hypothesis (PEH), applicable to many of the stories presented by the au-

² At the same time, it cannot be fully excluded that there exists a country in which the percentage of active voters is relatively low, but no turnout inequalities occur. Imagine that in this country, for example, 50% of eligible voters cast a ballot. But at the same time, suppose that those who participated in an election constitute a representative sample of the population, i.e. 50% of advantaged and 50% of disadvantaged people voted. In this hypothetical case, contending interests in society should be represented in the same proportions as when turnout approaches 100%.

³ As a solution of the dilemma, Lijphart (1997) advocates compulsory voting laws. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the impact of compulsory voting was considered repeatedly in the studies on contingent effects (see below).

thors of existing studies. Given this fact, the political equality hypothesis might represent a higher principle, standing above the contingent hypotheses put forward in the previous literature.

Since the paper is built around the attempt to mine a meta-principle, the meta-analysis of existing research will be presented after the theoretical section. This analysis verifies whether the PEH has been present in previous studies, albeit in latent form. As can be seen below, a systematic review of six papers published during 2007–2011 brings strong support for the existence of a higher principle of contingent effects in voter turnout theory.

Different Stories, Same Logic: Towards the Political Equality Hypothesis

As noted earlier, in representative democracies, political equality should arise when all eligible citizens vote. Because in this situation the probabilities of voting are constant, with a value always equal to 1, it may be assumed that no individual-level variables such as income, age or education influence the willingness to cast a ballot. When, by contrast, turnout is lower, it may be anticipated, in light of previous results from research teams led by Paul Lazarsfeld, Angus Campbell and Sidney Verba (see [Lazarsfeld et al. 1948](#); [Campbell et al. 1960](#); [Verba et al. 1995](#)), that only the socially privileged (in terms of personal resources and motivation to vote) will go to the polls. The fact that privileged citizens participate in higher proportions than do their unprivileged counterparts provides statistical evidence that voter turnout is indeed unequal at the individual level.

Aside from the impact of factors at the individual level, however, turnout also depends upon context-level forces. Some context-level variables, such as compulsory voting, may cause extraordinarily high levels of electoral participation ([Jackman 1987](#); [Franklin 2002](#); [Norris 2002](#) etc.), whereas others may have the opposite effect (one example might be a post-communist legacy, see [Kostadinova 2003](#); [Bernhagen and Marsh 2007](#); [Nový 2013](#)). When thinking about the connection between the direct impact of context-level factors on turnout rates and the influence of individual-level factors on propensity to vote (as it was described in the previous paragraph), one can conclude that context-level forces can moderate the impact of individual-level variables as follows:

PEH: Regardless of the explanatory variables involved, contextual factors that are positively associated with voter turnout should weaken the impact of individual-level variables on voting propensity, and vice-versa—contextual factors that are negatively associated with turnout rates should strengthen the impact of individual-level variables on the propensity to vote.

As the studies included in the meta-analysis below show, the finding that the effect size of individual-level variables varies with the levels of a contextual variable, i.e. that the effect of individual-level variables is *contingent* upon the levels of contextual variables, is familiar. What is novel is the statement that it is unimportant what particular independent variables we are discussing when we address the contingent effects of the determinants of turnout. Thus, it is inconsequential whether we are dealing with human development, the electoral formula, or mandatory voting in a particular case. What is important is whether

the direct effect of any contextual variable is positive or negative. If positive, turnout increases and political inequality shrinks. If, by contrast, a contextual variable affects turnout negatively, the effect size for any individual variable's influence on the propensity to vote should rise, and thus, political inequality becomes higher.⁴

Since the PEH is more general in scope than previous efforts to capture the contingent effects of the determinants of electoral participation, it can be regarded as a higher principle of these effects. Using this expression, I attempt to show that the PEH may have been present in spirit in previous research, but owing to its latent form, it has not been explicitly described. In what follows, its presence is uncovered in six studies published during 2007–2011 (Anderson 2007; Gallego 2010; Rocha et al. 2010; Quintelier et al. 2011; Söderlund et al. 2011; Singh 2011a). These papers include more than ten stories of how contingent effects of explanatory variables influence turnout. At first glance, this may seem an insufficient number for a meta-analysis.⁵ But there is no reason to keep collecting examples years into the future when this mechanism has already come to the fore.

A Near Universal Approach

Before focusing on small-scale analysis, it should be noted that cross-level interactions, which mathematically express the contingency between explanatory variables in multi-level models, may be interpreted in two distinct ways (for more on the issue, see Kam and Franzese 2007, as well as Figures I and II in the Appendix). Under the first interpretation, the impact of an individual-level variable on the propensity to vote varies across levels of a contextual variable. For example, the effects of personal resources, such as education or income, need not be constant in countries at different levels of living standard. In developed countries, one can expect that all citizens have guaranteed access to schooling, plentiful leisure time to devote to political issues, and so on. Contrast this to the situation in countries where the overall standard of living is low. In these countries, disadvantaged citizens' ability to overcome barriers to participation imposed by the context is much reduced, leading to a turnout gap between the socially privileged and unprivileged much greater than in countries where almost every citizen can afford the non-zero cost of voting. Simply put, the role played by personal resources should be intensified in the countries in which context-level forces make turnout harder.

The second possible interpretation focuses on the variance in the direct effect of the contextual variable on voting propensity. In this case, an incentive to vote that originates at the contextual level may induce some persons more than others to turn out at the polls. As an example, imagine two groups of voters with distinct ideas about the impact of preference

⁴ On the other hand, the relationships described in the PEH are based on the supposition that the degree of turnout bias toward the advantaged is *linearly* dependent upon aggregate voter turnout rates. For some authors (e.g. Persson et al. 2013; see also Lijphart 1997), this supposition, originally developed by Tingsten (1937: 230), is self-evident. However, there are some scholars who show that this "Tingsten's law of dispersion" holds only erratically (Sinnot and Achen 2008). This finding may stay beyond the fact that not universal, but only near universal approach is presented below.

⁵ Of course, the existence of other examples of contingent effects related to voter turnout that are not cited in this paper cannot be excluded. I admit that I lack access to many scientific databases in which other studies that include contingent hypotheses can be available.

voting. For highly sophisticated voters, i.e. those who are educated, politically interested, and so on, preference voting may be an incentive that leads to higher turnout. But for voters of less sophistication, the opportunity to express a preference for a particular candidate on the party list may be perceived to heighten the cost of voting. For less sophisticated voters, thus, either preference voting has no impact on turnout or its impact is even negative.

The remark that there are two different ways to interpret a multilevel model including one cross-level interaction is crucial for this paper. There is certain evidence indicating that the PEH has been constructed to apply only to the first of these cases, i.e. to the interpretation that some contextual factor moderates the effect of the individual-level variable on the propensity to vote. There do exist influential papers that utilize the second interpretation either in part or in full (see [Anduiza Perea 2002](#); [Kittilson and Anderson 2011](#); [Jusko and Shively 2005](#)). For these cases, the PEH is not applicable.⁶ Given this fact, the theoretical framework described above is considered to be near universal rather than fully universal. In other words, the PEH is certainly not some kind of “sociological law,” but only a higher principle how contingent effects in voter turnout theory often work.

Small-Scale Meta-Analysis

This section shows the extent to which the spirit of the PEH is embodied in the earlier literature. As noted, six papers have offered distinct stories about how context-level forces mediate the effect of individual-level variables on the propensity to vote (see [Table 1](#)). Taken in chronological order, the oldest of these papers is [Anderson \(2007\)](#). Anderson’s hypothesis, which has not been empirically tested, is that the impact of personal resources may depend on variables that affect the cost of voting, such as the registration process, or on factors such as weekend or early voting. He regards personal resources as positively related in general to the likelihood of voting. But when the cost of voting is very high, their impact soars ([ibid.: 596](#)).

⁶ To be more specific, [Anduiza Perea’s paper \(2002\)](#) on the varying impact of four institutional incentives (i.e. compulsory voting, voting facilities, electoral threshold and preference voting) on individual-level turnout among different types of individuals (the socially advantaged and disadvantaged) may be considered a pioneering work on contingent effects. In light of current research, however, it seems to be problematic. First, accounts of the interactions between contextual and individual predictors of turnout are developed on the basis of the results of the empirical analysis (i.e. *ex post*), not beforehand. At the same time, analytical section of her paper did not employ multilevel models (the analysis is based on simple logistic regression models), although the data are unambiguously characterized by a hierarchical structure. Notwithstanding these issues, the conclusion she offers is that institutional incentives affect turnout primarily among advanced voters who are aware of the impact of such incentives, while disadvantaged voters are rather insensitive to changes in the institutional setting, which does not correspond with the PEH. When it comes to next two studies, unfortunately, the same is true. [Kittilson and Anderson \(2011\)](#) focus on the impact of some characteristics of the party system on voting propensity. For some voters, in particular those who show high levels of political efficacy, the higher number of political parties and ideological polarization are welcome features, because they enable meaningful choices, which make a difference. The probability of voting within this subgroup of voters should increase when many distinct choices are available. On the other hand, there are also those who see electoral participation less efficacious. For these citizens, high fragmentation and polarization of the party system cause higher cost of voting, and therefore, their probability of voting should decrease when electoral supply is genuinely rich. Finally, [Jusko and Shively \(2005\)](#) have also dealt with the impact of the (effective) number of parties on individual-level turnout. While among the so-called high information voters, the impact of party system fragmentation appears to be positive, among low information voters, owing to the higher cost of voting, the effect of electoral supply on voting probability tends to be negative.

This expectation is in complete accord with the PEH. A context-level factor, the cost of voting, has a direct negative effect on turnout: the higher the cost of voting, the lower the rate of turnout. But the cost of voting simultaneously “amplifies” the positive impact of personal resources on the probability of casting a ballot. Simply put, if the cost of voting is very high, socially privileged citizens are much more likely to vote than are their unprivileged counterparts, while if the cost of voting is close to zero, the level of personal resources plays almost no role.

The second paper, written by Gallego (2010), follows Anderson’s work to a large extent. It includes six stories about the moderating influence of context-level forces on the individual-level relationship between the explanatory variable and the probability of casting a ballot. At the individual level, the paper focuses solely on the effect of education. Gallego thinks its impact on the propensity to vote should be conditioned by several macro factors: the proportion of left-wing parties, the degree of unionization, the existence of a preference voting system, voter registration requirements, fragmentation of the party system, and compulsory voting. In terms of direct effects, she sees compulsory voting and the proportion of left-wing parties and union members as beneficial for turnout. By contrast, preference voting, citizen-initiated registration and a higher number of parties may lead to lower turnout.

With respect to contingent effects, the share of left-wing parties and union members should weaken the impact of education on the propensity to vote. This is because left-wing parties and unions are considered to be mobilizing agencies for disadvantaged citizens. Accordingly, these organizations provide additional resources for their supporters (see Verba et al. 1995), usually recruited among the less educated. Compulsory voting may reduce the impact of education because, in Gallego’s view (2010: 242), unprivileged people—those with less education and thus less wealth—should be more wary of being fined for abstaining from the vote.

The stories offered for the remaining three contingent effects of contextual variables look somewhat different. Preference voting, voter registration requirements, and greater fragmentation of the party system should increase the impact of education level on the propensity to vote. The reason is that these context-level forces introduce a higher cost of voting more easily borne by highly educated people.

In light of these hypotheses about contingent effects, let us examine the extent to which Gallego’s assumptions are in line with the PEH. Table 1 shows that all six stories accord with the PEH. The existence of the higher principle thus gains another source of support.

Rocha et al. (2010) have also dealt with some unprivileged or disadvantaged groups of people whose level of electoral participation may be positively stimulated by particular contextual forces. The authors have built their story on previous findings from the individual level that race can significantly affect the likelihood of voting. In the case of the U.S. elections, this assumption involves primarily African Americans and Latinos who should be less likely to vote than whites. However, when the minority representation in the state legislature is sufficiently large, the minority voters are more mobilized to participate in politics and feel more efficacious. The negative impact of non-white race on probability of voting, therefore, decreases or disappears with increasing percentage of the minorities within the legislature. Again, such equalizing mechanism perfectly matches the PEH.

Table 1
The spirit of the PEH in the existing literature

Article	Interaction		Expected direct effect of contextual variable	Expected contingent effect of contextual variable	Spirit of PEH	Significant in empirical analysis?
	Contextual variable	Individual variable				
Anderson (2007)	Cost of voting (could include the registration process, voting facilities, etc.)	Personal resources (could include education, income, etc.)	-	↑	Yes	Not tested, fictional example
Gallego (2010)	Share of leftist parties	Education	+	↓	Yes	Yes, but reversed direction of contingent effect
	Unionization (share of union members)	Education	+	↓	Yes	No
	Preference voting	Education	-	↑	Yes	Yes
	Citizen-initiated registration	Education	-	↑	Yes	Yes
	Party system fragmentation	Education	-	↑	Yes	Yes
	Compulsory voting	Education	+	↓	Yes	No
Rocha et al. (2010)	Minority representation in state legislature	Race (African American, Latino)	+	↓	Yes	Yes
Quintelier et al. (2011)	Compulsory voting	Resources (gender, education, age)	+	↓	Yes	Mixed evidence
Söderlund et al. (2011)	Saliency of the elections	Political interest	+	↓	Yes	Interaction effect not tested
	Compulsory voting	Political interest	+	↓	Yes	Mixed evidence
	Closeness of the race	Political interest	+	↓	Yes	No
	Party system fragmentation	Political interest	-	↑	Yes	Mixed evidence
Singh (2011a)	Disproportionality (and plurality electoral system)	Expected benefits	-	↓	No, but most likely, this is not contingent effect	No

Notes: The author simply does not have access to every scientific database and periodical or book worldwide. The possibility that the literature contains additional stories that have not been cited cannot be excluded. '+' means positive effect; '-' means negative effect; '↑' means that contextual variable should dampen the effect of the individual variable on the propensity to vote; '↓' means that contextual variable should dampen the effect of the individual variable. It should be emphasized that this table does not cover so-called meso-micro interactions, i.e. such interactions where the effect of individual-level variable on probability of voting is perceived to be moderated by the forces not from the macro, but meso level (i.e., by the degree of social integration of a person: see Verba et al. 1995; Schlozman et al. 2012). There are several stories that show that meso-level factors might have an equalizing effect on the individual-level relationship between explanatory variable and probability of voting (Armington and Schädel 2015; cf. Enos et al. 2014). To a certain extent, Gallego (2010) and Rocha et al. (2010) have also dealt with contingent effects of meso-level forces (unionization etc.), but these factors were measured, in contrast to the articles not mentioned in the table, at the macro level.

As outlined above by Gallego's work (2010), mandatory voting can moderate the impact of individual-level variables on propensity to vote. Another example is shown in the paper written by Quintelier and her colleagues (2011). First of all, these authors have pointed out that there is a solid relationship between three variables: compulsory voting, voter turnout and political equality. Further, it is underlined that previous research has revealed a strong positive relationship between compulsory voting and turnout. But at the same time, citing Lijphart's seminal article published in 1997, Quintelier et al. (*ibid*: 401) remind that the proponents of compulsory voting argue that it not only increases turnout, but also promotes equal participation in the electoral process. Although their subsequent empirical analysis, addressing varying effect of gender, education and age, has not brought expected results, the story introduced in the paper unambiguously contains the spirit of the PEH (as demonstrated in Table 1).

Söderlund and colleagues (2011) leave off the impact of personal resources at the individual level in favour of political attitudes. More specifically, the focal point of their analysis is the uneven impact of political interest from country to country. The authors assume that four major institutional components stimulate the variance present in the role played by political interest: the salience of elections, the closeness of the race, compulsory voting, and party system fragmentation.

In political contests of lower salience, such as elections to the European Parliament, turnout is usually lower than in first-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Söderlund et al. (2011) say this may boost the impact of political interest on the propensity to vote. In major elections, they reason, citizens with low interest levels may sometimes be persuaded to vote by elaborate party campaigns, the media, or their friends. In this case, their propensity to vote is on virtually the same level as for more politically interested citizens. But in less important contests, this additional mobilization is often missing, and hence, the level of political interest plays a greater role in the voter's decision to turn out at the polls.

Söderlund et al. (2011) have further suggested that the closeness of elections can moderate the impact of political interest. If the elections are highly competitive and the candidates or political parties struggle to the finish over every single ballot, many occasional voters will turn out, because each extra vote counts in naming the future Prime Minister. Not surprisingly, these occasional voters are usually those who show less interest in politics. The association between level of political interest and the probability of casting a ballot should therefore be weaker in elections where the outcome is uncertain and competition among the political actors is intense.

The contingent effects of the two remaining context-level factors have received partial attention above in talking about the impact of personal resources. These factors are compulsory voting and the number of parties competing (for a detailed treatment, see Gallego 2010). These institutional features may moderate the effect of political interest on the probability of voting, as well, in the view of Söderlund and his colleagues (2011). The mechanism they offer is similar to that noted above: When voting is made mandatory, almost all eligible voters go to the polls. This implies that the probability of voting no longer depends on individual-level factors, personal resources and motivation in particular. Hence, compulsory voting should reduce the impact of political interest to virtually nil. Fragmentation of the party system is once again perceived to be a disturbing element. The greater the

number of contestants, the higher the information costs that voters must invest in the elections. The result is lower turnout, primarily impacting citizens with low levels of political interest (because those who normally pay attention to politics will easily adapt to a broader supply).

As with the foregoing papers, all four stories propounded by Söderlund et al. (2011) fully reflect the higher principle embodied in the PEH. In each, there is a particular context-level variable that (1) directly increases turnout and at the same time, it weakens the impact of individual-level variables on the propensity to vote, or (2) directly decreases turnout and at the same time, it strengthens the impact of individual-level variables. At the moment, thus, the running score is thirteen-to-null in favour of the spirit of the PEH.

The final paper by Singh (2011a) could be said to challenge the standing of the PEH to some extent. Singh anticipates that the nature of the electoral system will impact how the benefits expected from voting for the preferred party affect turnout. He argues that under restrictive, disproportional rules, calculation of the expected benefits should affect the likelihood of voting less than under ideal proportional representation. As has been frequently noted (for example, in Cox 1997), high levels of disproportionality threaten the election gains of non-major parties because many voters will vote strategically rather than on the basis of their convictions, even if the decision to do so reduces the benefits they reap. At the same time, highly restrictive rules may decrease turnout, since some of those wishing to vote for parties with a slim chance to win seats are naturally hesitant to support alternative political actors. With this in mind, the impact of expected benefits on individual-level turnout should be greater under proportional rules.

Setting Singh's work (2011a) alongside the PEH reveals clearly discrepant thinking. In his study, a context-level factor, the degree of proportionality, has a positive effect on voter turnout. But the use of PR should also *increase* the effect of the expected benefits on the likelihood of voting. By contrast, the PEH would anticipate that proportional rules would lead to a diminished effect of individual-level variables. It thus appears that the spirit of the PEH is not present at all.

On the other hand, there are counterarguments suggesting that the PEH might truly be a higher principle, after all. The most significant is that Singh (*ibid.*) may have fallen prey to a slight misunderstanding by neglecting the disparity between indirect and contingent effects (see Anderson 2007; Dalton and Anderson 2011; Kittilson and Anderson 2011). Indirect effects work on the assumption that there is a contextual variable affecting the *value*, i.e. the level, of an individual-level variable regarded as a proximate predictor of voting. By contrast, contingent effects concern cases when a context-level variable moderates the *effect size*, i.e. the level of the beta coefficient, of an individual-level variable. The question, then, is whether Singh's paper is actually describing the contingent effect, or instead the indirect effect of the electoral rules.

Although no one has challenged him so far, the second option seems more convincing. The restrictive impact of an electoral system relates to the size of the expected benefits, rather than the effect size of those benefits. Under ideal PR, all voters may vote their convictions. The expected benefits from voting for the preferred party thus reach their highest possible value. By contrast, under plurality and other disproportional systems, some

voters are forced to vote strategically. As rational actors, they consequently expect fewer benefits from voting, which affects their willingness to participate. Hence, a three-part causal chain arises, starting with the degree of proportionality, continuing with the expected-benefit factor, and ending with the decision to vote or abstain. From this angle, it is apparent that Singh is dealing not with contingent, but rather with indirect effects. This study may thus be removed from the list (see [Table 1](#)), leaving the score 13–0 in favour of the PEH.

Discussion and Conclusion

Over the past several years, research on contingent effects in studies of electoral participation has become fashionable. Accounts that employ contingent effects, as opposed to direct effects, are able to provide a more comprehensive answer to the crucial question of why people vote. As demonstrated above, contingent effects reach beyond the conventional logic of direct effects by emphasizing that the impact of one predictor on the target variable, i.e. probability of voting, may vary across values of another predictor. When the statistical techniques that permit this type of effects to be studied were developed, in particular multi-level modelling and cross-level interactions, extensive theoretical discussions arose about how diverse contextual forces may moderate the influence of individual-level factors on the propensity to vote.

The effort in this article has been to seek out a higher principle standing above individual stories concerning contingent effects. Although only about ten of these stories have been found in the available literature so far, it has been argued here that all of them work with the same logic, that of the so-called political equality hypothesis, which is based upon Lijphart's (1997) reflections on how to ensure that all citizens have an equal voice in representative democracies. Because the logic of contingent effects appears to be more or less uniform, the particular independent variables chosen are immaterial—all of the stories contain, even if latently, the spirit of the PEH.

Of course, the higher principle described in this paper is not inviolable. Some points must always be stressed when speaking about the PEH. First, it is only a near universal approach to explaining voter turnout. If, for instance, the contingent relations between variables are reversed so that the effect of the context-level variable on voting propensity should be different for citizens with varying levels of individual variables (such as socially privileged vs. unprivileged persons), the PEH often breaks down (see [Figure II](#) in Appendix and [footnote 6](#) above).

This brings up another sensitive area. Since diverse groups of citizens may differ in how context-level variables influence their propensity to vote, there is an implication that the overall direct effect of these variables on turnout reflected in the PEH may be composed of contradictory forces. Much of the previous literature has highlighted the mixed nature of the evidence for the effects of variables such as the electoral system, fragmentation of the party system, and so on (e.g. [Evans 2004](#); [Geys 2006](#)). For completeness, then, the PEH might be modified slightly so that its first sentence reads, “Regardless of the explanatory variables involved, contextual factors that are *predominantly*

positively associated with voter turnout should weaken the impact of individual-level variables...”⁷

This correction may also indicate that the contingent effect of certain context-level variables might be selective in that they do not take in all the effects of individual-level predictors of turnout. In other words, the impact of some micro-level factors on the probability of voting may be resistant to the moderating influence of the macro-level factor in question.

Finally, it is often difficult to delineate a fixed boundary between studies on contingent and those on indirect effects (e.g., Kittilson and Anderson 2011; see Singh 2011a), because adding a single word can dramatically change the nature of a hypothesis. It makes a big difference whether we suppose that (1) a context-level variable is responsible for the *size* (value, level) of an individual-level variable that may affect propensity to vote (indirect effect), or that (2) a context-level variable is responsible for the *effect size* of an individual-level variable on propensity to vote (contingent effect). Unfortunately, this minor linguistic distinction may give rise to a major misunderstanding. It must always be decided at the outset, then, whether the story is to centre on the indirect effects hypothesis or the contingent effects hypothesis.

In spite of the limitations discussed in the foregoing paragraphs, this paper has shown that there might be an umbrella principle useful for proposing new stories of how context-level variables moderate the impact of individual-level variables on the propensity to vote. The small-scale meta-analysis has confirmed that there is a latent logic in the existing literature. Given this evidence, PEH may serve at least as a helpful tool in developing new contingent hypotheses about the impact of the determinants of voter turnout.

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⁷ And the same modification is appropriate at the end of the definition: “...contextual factors that are *predominantly* negatively associated with turnout rates should strengthen the impact of individual-level variables on propensity to vote.”

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Appendix

Figure I

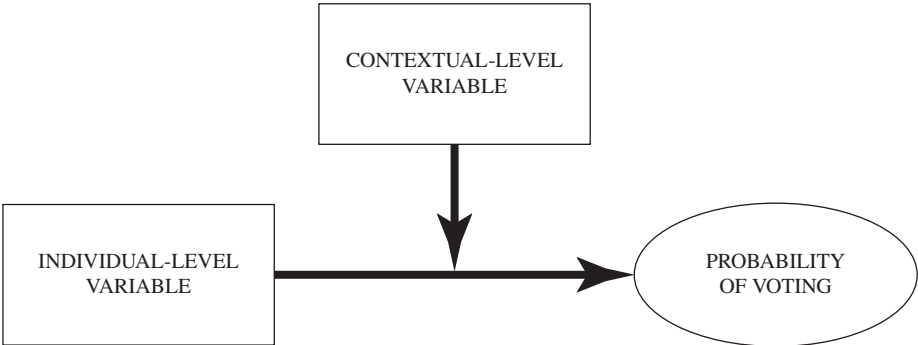
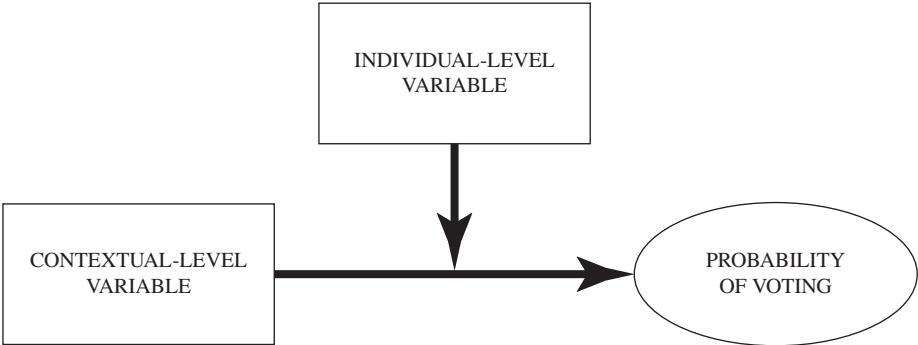


Figure II



Source: Author.