

Non-voting in Catalonia

Joan FONT

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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This paper aims to present a brief approach to non-voting in Catalonia. Its development will be half way between a case study and a wider reflection on the issue. That is to say that although focusing discussions and examples on the features of Catalan nonvoting, many of the subjects arisen and some of the hypotheses laid seek to have a much more general validity.

The paper is structured in three sections: in the first one we will try to give a general diagnose of the subject by analysing Catalan non-voting from a comparative perspective, looking at differentiated behaviours depending on the election level and on responses to the political context. We will emphasize the unfinished character of the explanations of each of these phenomena. In the second section we will summarize some of the most basic evidences on the subject that have been pointed out by electoral geography and sociology in Catalonia, which will help us to define some of the necessary explanatory elements. Finally, the last section will contain some hypotheses and reflections. We shall present there the main components that we think should conform an explanatory model of non-voting, and will briefly discuss this behaviour's rationality and its political importance.

1. Some basic facts

A first clear characteristic of non-voting in Catalonia and Spain is that, in the traditionally called "first order" elections it reaches relatively high levels in comparison with Europe. Table 1 shows turnout means of 17 European countries as well as of Spain's 17 Autonomous Communities (or Regions). We can appreciate that even the most participative Region has a higher non-voting rate than the European mean, but we can also see that there are quite a few regions with higher voter turnout rates than France, the United Kingdom or Ireland. It is not the case of Catalonia: this is the sixth Spanish Communitie according to the highest non-voting rate, only surpassed in Europe by the exceptional case of Switzerland.

Given the traditional interpretation, associating higher nonvoting rates with less urbanized and developed areas (1), this hierarchy is surprising since Catalonia is one of the first Spanish areas according to both indicators. However, reality has sufficiently shown that participation rankings cannot be explained through a unique cause, either at European or Spanish level, and even less by such a mechanistic argument (2).

Local or regional elections are difficult to compare internationally, given both diversity in the coincidences of different level elections as well as very irregular power distributions among each country's administrations. Besides, at the Spanish level, the fact that Regional elections are held simultaneously with Local elections in 13 Regions makes any comparison of non-voting rates with the Catalan case risky.

Thus, in a non-comparative perspective, the most clear evidence is the continuity of the traditional rule by which turnout rates are highest in first order elections (Reif, 1985). Beyond this fact, it seems difficult to state anything else than the apparent tendency of local elections to occupy the second place in high turnout rates, and the particularly low participative character of the unique European election held on its own (1989).

Which are the reasons of this ordering of participation intensities? If the phenomenon of higher non-voting in second order elections has already been enough explained, the different degrees of participation in them is quite an unsolved problem. Is voting higher in those seemingly more relevant elections? In the ones where more powerful administrations -or that manage more funds-are elected? Or, finally, people do vote more when governments that are seen as closer and more likely to be receptive to citizen's demands are elected? 42% of Catalan people say that elections to the Spanish Parliament are the most relevant, in front of 17% that think that the most important are to the Catalan Parliament. Only 8% attributes this character to local elections (Font, 1991). These data could well be related with the budget distribution among the different Spanish administrations, although it is quite risky to try to establish any causal relationship.

On the other side, although lacking data limited to Catalonia, we must take into account that Spaniards see town councils as the institution that influences most their daily life, as the most interesting to them, as the level more likely to be influenceable by them(3) or as the most trustable one (Montero, 1989). The combination of all these factors, besides attention paid to each electoral campaign in the media, the mobilizing efforts done in each case by parties, as well as the general political climate -more or less competitive and/or encouraging and more or less critical or hopeful with political actors-, allow us to explain both, the usual orderings and fluctuations and the exceptions that turnout rates tend to suffer.

The above mentioned factors introduce us into the last general element that deserves to be mentioned. Catalonia is not an exception in its non-voting evolution, very sensible to the political moment's phenomena. Changes in voters turnout have always gone in parallel with those evidenced in the Spanish case (Font, 1991). Both Catalonia and Spain have suffered exceptional fluctuations in non-voting rates -very unusual in their size in recent European political life- (Montero, 1990). The most important changes relate to the very exceptional circumstances of 1977 and 1982. However, even if we exclude these two cases, we still can find sudden changes in participation levels not usual in our context. For instance, between the 1987 local elections and the following ones in 1991, without any significant change in the political situation or the party system, voting falls ten points in Catalonia.

However, as in the previous case, it is easier to state the fact than to explain it,

especially if we aim to isolate the factors that may really contribute to understand this evolution. The election's competitiveness is one of the most usual arguments in non-voting studies(4). But if we interpret competitiveness as the distance between the two first political forces, nothing explains the evolution of participation between 1977 and 1979 or between 1982 and 1986. Between the first two elections the main parties did not suffer big changes in their vote percentage, while non-voting increased about 10 points. In the second pair of elections, divergence between theory and reality is still larger since while the main parties tended to get closer, voting also decreased notably.

Change expectations have been one of the most used elements to explain the unusually high turnout of 1982 (Montero, 1986). If we understand them as the possibility of a change of government, the argument is again weak in respect with the 1979 election, when high non-voting coincided with the results' uncertainty(5). The desirability of change could be a more useful definition, although still difficult to support with sufficient data.

In conclusion, the diagnose of non-voting in Catalonia shares elements of peculiarity (low turnout) with others of normality (different non-voting levels according to the type of elections, as well as sensitivity to the political moment). To understand them, we only count on some clues and hypotheses, both general and broadly defined. Catalonia is not unusual in the fact that explanations of its non-voting are not easy and go necessarily through the combination of different causal elements.

2. Some approaches

Two of the main traditional ways of interpretation of electoral behaviour can bring some light to understand non-voting: electoral geography and sociology. The first one contributes by presenting maps of the participative intensity, the main features of which have changed little in these fifteen years of elections. Catalonia's most interior strip appears as one of the areas with higher non-voting rates, coinciding enough with those less populated and more traditional counties, from the Leridan Pyrenees to the Ebro river almost without interruption. In many elections, but particularly in the regional ones, a second area with highest nonvoting rates -and with very different political and socioeconomic characteristics-, comes to join the former group: Barcelona's metropolitan area.

Tendencies followed by each of these areas are neither clear nor linear. Firstly, we must consider that the 50% of the Catalan population living in Barcelona's area has not got an homogeneous behaviour. Thus, non-voting evolution in Barcelona must at least be analysed in two different groups, the capital and its metropolitan surroundings. These two areas have followed very different paths. In the

first elections the capital was one of the areas with highest non-voting, while after 1982 its turnout rates have been higher than the metropolitan area's (Table 2). Besides, comparison of these areas with the rest of Catalonia also shows irregular tendencies which can only be explained from multicausal perspectives that consider both, the different populations of each of these areas and their political fidelity -and thus the different answers they will give to changes in the political moment- We will have to take also into account such factors as the interaction between type of habitat and type of election or the unequal impact of possible problems in the electoral roll.

For instance, in the first local elections the highest turnout was that of Barcelona's metropolitan area. Four years later this rate just increased in two points, while in the city of Barcelona it increased up to thirteen points and in the rest of Catalonia almost 19. What does explain such different tendencies? Probably these different evolutions are somehow related with the clear victory of the left everywhere, but particularly in Barcelona's metropolitan area, with the still scarce party build-up in many areas of the non-metropolitan Catalonia or with possible problems in the electoral roll in the Catalan capital in the elections previous to 1982 (6). As another example, the deepening participative differences between Barcelona's surroundings and the rest of Catalonia in regional elections cannot be explained without taking into account the population characteristics of the first area (mostly working-class immigration from Spain's Southern regions), as well as the consolidation of the electoral hegemony of a government coalition (CiU) which does not represent this group's interests in Catalan politics.

It thus seems that electoral sociology may contribute with new elements to understand our object of study and its distribution in time and space. Generally speaking, most non-voting groups in Catalonia are not very far from Lipset's classical characterization (1987): the youth and the old, as well as immigrants, less educated or working class people vote less. However, the comparison of profiles of those who did not vote in different elections will prevent us from falling in any sociological determinism. Changes in the differences' intensity between these groups and the rest of the population, the disappearance of some of them in certain contexts or the emergence of new non voters' groups in certain elections will make clear the unexistence of any simplistic relation between social position and political behaviour.

We will present a first example with the most trustable existing data, those obtained from representative samples of the electoral roll (7). In the city of Barcelona, non-voting increases almost 5 points between the 1988 regional elections and the 1991 local ones. But these differences concentrate among very specific groups (Table 3): 6 points among the youngest and just 1 among people older than 50; it does not vary among those without primary studies and rises 5 points among people with University education; it rises 7 points among people who write in Catalan and falls 4 among non-Catalan speakers. In short, while some of the already existing

differences in 1988 grow (as the case of age), others disappear (place of origin) or diminish (educational level or knowledge of the Catalan language).

These evolutions already show that the relation between social structure and electoral behaviour is not an easy one. Many of the changes just described can be explained by the specific character and differentiated results of regional elections in Catalonia (8). However, even in the same type of elections we find different answers to the circumstances. For instance, between the 1984 and 1988 regional elections non-voting rates increase in the whole territory, but particularly among the most educated groups -students or managers- while they fall or do not vary among the old, the unemployed, or the people with lowest education levels (Font, 1991). If the 1984 non voters' profiles were more similar to Lipset's classical portrait, in 1988 -an election with an announced winner-, non voters' profiles fade away as little politicized social groups that usually vote stayed at home.

But these variations in non-voting profiles are not either an exclusive phenomenon of the Catalan case. Although there are some groups that tend to vote more than others, intensities of these differences will be quite diverse according to the political context and moment in the Spanish, the French or the American case. Socioeconomic inequalities characteristic of the capitalist system will tend to reproduce in the political sphere in the form of different turnout rates. But the translation of these inequalities into very or little differentiated behaviour in accordance with age, class, gender or religion group will essentially depend upon each of these groups' political representation. The fact that participative differences between classes are particularly scarce in Sweden and specially high in the USA is not a product of chance but of the intervention's capability that the working classes of each of these two countries has had in their respective political life (Burnham, 1980). It is not by chance, either, that the French youth vote more in the first round of elections, when green candidates are present (Percheron, 1985) or that Germany, with a green party particularly addressed to the young population, is where participative differences according to age appear to be smaller.

3. Some conclusions

A first clear conclusion of all the comments already made is that non-voting requires a multicausal and complex explanation which will have to include very diverse elements: it will be essential to take into account sociological and institutional factors, the electoral market role and the characteristics of political conflict. Figure 1 shows a possible attempt of summarizing these elements in an explanatory model that we have developed, and to a great extent verified, in a longer study (9).

Briefly, we think that any attempt to explain non-voting needs 6

comprehensive elements: the individual's social position, his general political attitudes, the social context where she/he lives, the role of the main political actors, the historic situation and the specific political moment (Figure 1). These elements do not operate in a chaotic and simultaneous way on the decision to vote or non vote (Straits, 1990). As it seems obvious, the closer characteristics to an individual and voluntary behaviour as voting will also be those that fulfil these conditions: political attitudes. If we confine ourselves to considering non-voting as a dependent variable and all the other factors as equal explanatory elements, it could well be that they added little, statistically speaking, to attitudes contribution. However, these attitudes have not been created in a vacuum. To limit ourselves to analysing them could mean going little beyond tautology. Asserting that people do not vote because they are not interested or have not political identifications is literally true but substantively little informative.

Thus, still in the individual domain, we must look for part of political perceptions roots in the individual social characteristics and all the interests, identifications or interpretations of the world that it brings about (Heath et al, 1985). In addition, to search the explanation of political behaviours in exclusively individual factors is an at least insufficient strategy. Identical positions according to social classes, age or religious groups will generate different perceptions of politics depending on the social context where one lives. Although political actors could in fact be considered as part of this context, we think that their essential role justifies an independent analysis. They are not only an element of the context that will influence attitudes' formation but may also work in preelectoral moments and, without altering attitudes, mobilize citizens more or less efficiently.

None of these relations is nevertheless of a determinant kind. Although the fact that young people voting less is a regular enough phenomenon, this is not a product of any necessary relation. Which are the important sociological cleavages to understand non-voting will depend on the structure of political conflict in each specific society. That is to say, social positions will translate into attitudes shaped by a specific historical situation. Social relations and political institutions will make class-references and other sociological identities more or less determinant, depending on the country, to understand political attitudes and, through them, electoral participation.

At the same time, political attitudes do not change abruptly. Although they may be in a permanent redefinition, their essential guidelines keep quite constant along time. On the contrary, we have seen that turnout does evolve quite quickly. Indeed, translation of political perceptions into behaviours is neither automatic, but depends on the political moment. The specific political circumstances will provoke that people more or less interested or with a more or less intense identification with political actors get out to vote or not. Catalan people interest in politics did not increase

significantly between 1979 and 1982: it was the different political moment which brought to vote even those less interested.

Consideration of all these elements in any explanatory model of non-voting seems to us one of the first essential steps to understand the phenomenon. By ordering them appropriately we will be able to see that all of them are important, even though their contribution to the direct explanation of the decision to vote or not is very different (10).

Two final reflections seem important to us. Firstly, from many of the above mentioned considerations clearly results the image of non-voting as a rational and understandable phenomenon. Its evolution does not depend on fate but on the changing relations between society and politics. Turnout rates are an answer to the conditions of each particular political situation. Catalan people vote more at the more decisive elections or to elect more powerful institutions. The groups that feel more protagonist or better represented on the political arena are also those who vote more intensely. But the fact that voting is a rational answer to political circumstances does not mean that it is done on strictly utilitarian terms. Considering vote as a civic duty still constitutes a necessary tool to understand why in many elections a majority of people vote, and neither party-identifications nor the perceived closeness of competition appear to act in strict terms of expected gains.

Lastly, it is worthwhile to question ourselves on the real importance of the high non-voting rate verified in the Catalan case. The first answer is not theoretically relevant, but it matters in a country where the goodness of social and political phenomena is judged according to their Europeanism. If we accepted this criterion, we should clearly have to answer that Catalan non-voting is not European. Consequently, it must become one of the focus of those who turn all Europeanism's features into their political goal.

As usual, the answer to which is the relevance of non-voting will depend on the paradigm we start from: it is a worrying fact from the democratic theory that builds from a citizens' participation presumption, as it is from the new Catholic catechism. Its consequences may be less clear if we put all the stress on political stability (11). Lastly, if what interests us is democracy's role as a system to regulate political conflict the answer will force us to return to non-voting's social distribution. A somewhat scarce but socially distributed participation would be, from this stand-point less worrying than a higher absolute level which implied in practice the exclusion of a relevant particular group of the country's electoral life. It is quite unthinkable that this group would stop having political demands. And, if they are not represented at the political institutions, these would lose their regulatory capability and conflict would have to be solved in other arenas.

Table1

TABLE 1		
Non-voting rates in first order elections in Europe and in the Spanish Regions		
Country or Region	Rate	Number of elections
Switzerland	49.5	5
Galicia	40.8	5
Canary Islands	32.	5
Asturias	28.4	5
Basque Country	28.4	5
Balearic Islands	28.2	5
Catalonia	26.8	5
Andalucia	26.7	5
Spain	26.7	5
United Kingdom	25.3	6
Ireland	25.2	6
Navarra	25.2	5
Castilla-Leon	24.7	5
Extremadura	24.7	5
Aragon	24.6	5
France	24.5	5
Cantabria	23.7	5
Murcia	23.0	5
Rioja	22.4	5
Finland	21.8	7
Madrid	21.8	5
Castilla-La Mancha	21.4	5
Greece	21.3	6
Valencian Community	20.9	5
Portugal	19.5	6
Norway	18.4	5
Netherlands	16.1	6
Denmark	14.2	9
Germany	11.2	5
Luxembourg	10.7	3
Sweden	10.1	7
Iceland	10.1	6
Italy	8.8	5
Austria	8.3	6
Belgium	6.7	7

Table2

TABLE 2
Turnout in Barcelona, its metropolitan area and the rest of Catalonia

	Area B*	Barcelona	Rest of Catalonia	Catalonia
Spanish				
1977	80.9	75.3	81.4	79.3
1979	71.7	64.2	70.4	68.5
1982	81.0	80.8	80.5	80.7
1986	67.8	67.4	71.2	69.2
1989	65.9	68.4	66.6	67.1
Regional				
1980	59.7	58.2	64.5	61.4
1983/4	58.5	64.7	66.5	64.3
1987/8	52.6	59.9	61.8	59.3
Local				
1979	61.9	54.3	51.5	60.9
1983	63.9	67.4	70.0	67.9
1987	64.8	68.8	69.9	68.5
European				
1987	64.7	68.7	68.9	67.9
1989	51.4	53.5	50.4	51.5

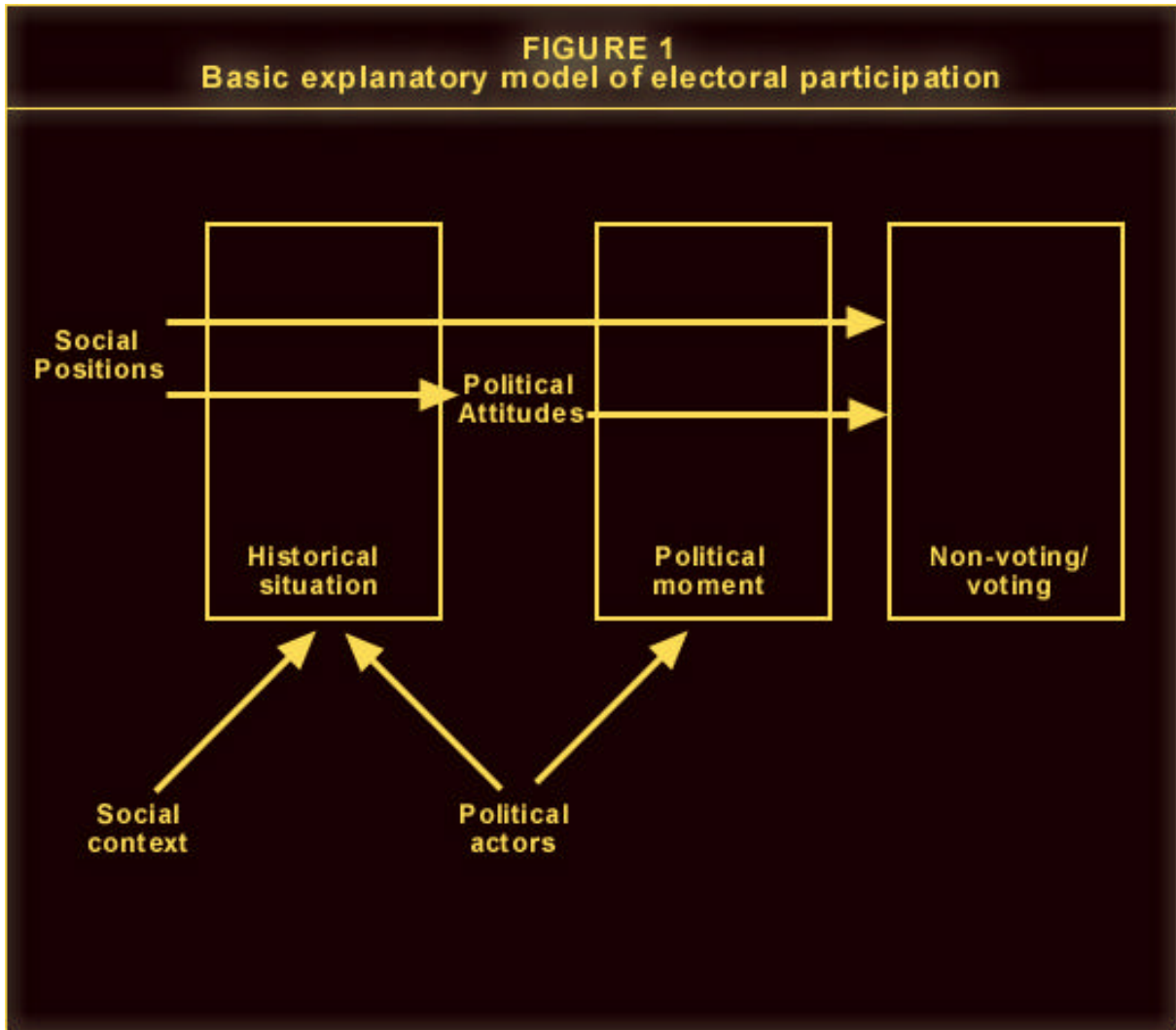
* Metropolitan area with the capital excluded

Table3

TABLE 3
Non-voting in Barcelona in the elections of 1988 and 1991

	1988	1991
Gender		
Male	41	44
Female	41	44
Age		
18-34	50	56
35-49	39	43
50-74	34	35
+75	45	46
Education		
Non primary	45	45
Primary	42	44
High School	41	46
University	30	35
Place of Origin		
Catalonia	37	43
Other places	46	45
Knowledge of Catalans		
Non-speaker	51	47
Speaker	40	43
Writer	33	40

Figure1



Notes

- (1) For instance, studies of Nie and others (1969) who assert that economic development will generate social changes (among them, urbanization) which will at the same time favour an increasing political participation.
- (2) Contributions with a comparative character are too numerous to give a comprehensive relation here. A brief descriptive synthesis in Dittrich & Johansen (1983). For the Spanish case, Justel (1990) or Montero (1990).
- (3) 60% of Spaniards think that town-councils influence "a lot" or "enough" their daily life, in front of 50% for central government and 56% for regional governments. 52% is "very" or "quite interested" in its town-council's action, in front of 42% for the central government's and 38% for the regional governments'. On the other side, 18% think that they can influence "a lot" or "enough" local political decisions, 14 % regional government's decisions and 13 % central government's. All data come from the CIS' study 1788, developed in January 1989 over a representative sample of 3.346 people.
- (4) Denver & Hands (1971), Eagles & Erfle (1989), Rallings & Thrasher (1990), Lutz (1991) or Denver & Halfacree (1992) for the British case; Lancelot (1968) for the French case; and Kim et al. (1972), Patterson & Caldeira (1983), Zimmer (1985) or Caldeira et al. (1990) for the American case. Niemi & Weisberg (1976) are some of the authors who point out the difficulties to apply the concept to proportional electoral systems.
- (5) Data presented by Wert (1982) indicate that preelectoral polls were quite divided in predicting UCD's or PSOE's victory. If there was any coincidence among them it precisely was the uncertainty of results given the similarity of vote estimations for both parties.
- (6) Spanish censuses are redone every ten years. Thus, the census used in the last years of the decade are full of errors which can be more or less homogeneously distributed. The city of Barcelona lost population in the second half of the seventies and there is partial evidence pointing out that its censuses' inflation could explain part of the high non-voting rates of those years (Font, 1992).
- (7) Both studies are based on representative samples of Barcelona's population of about 130.000 people done by Barcelona's town-council (Ajuntament de Barcelona, n.d. Equip de Sociologia Electoral, 1993).
- (8) We can find enough elements to understand these specificities in the Electoral Atlas made by the Equip de Sociologia Electoral (1981 and 1990). These elections differentiated voting behavior is studied in more detail in Montero & Font (1991) and Pallarés & Font (1993).
- (9) The model's individual components, operationalized in several sociological and attitudinal variables have been proved relevant in a doctoral thesis (Font, 1992). The role of social context and political actors appeared also to be important independently, but both levels of analysis have not been integrated in a simultaneous verification due to lack of appropriate data.
- (10) In this sense, our data would be also close to results obtained in the majority of contexts when sociological and attitudinal variables have been simultaneously combined: only attitudes and age would have been significative. But this kind of treatment forgets that other variables as class, education or gender also help to conform attitudes.
- (11) Although traditional interpretations considered high voting rates as a possible generator of instability, more recent works point out that, although maybe related with a shorter duration of the executives, high voting rates are also linked with lower levels of political violence as they imply the resolution of conflict through pacific means (Powell, 1982).

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