

# Election Law Reform in Chile: The Implementation of Automatic Registration and Voluntary Voting

Tiffany D. Barnes and Gabriela Rangel

## ABSTRACT

In 2012, Chile passed a major election law reform to adopt automatic registration and voluntary voting. Prior to this, Chile, like most Latin American countries, had a compulsory voting law. With this reform, Chile became one of only a few countries to ever move from compulsory to voluntary voting. Since the new law came into effect, two elections have taken place. The purpose of this research note is to review registration and turnout patterns in comparative historical terms, discuss the pros and cons of the election law reform, and to evaluate the 2012 and 2013 election outcomes with respect to voter turnout and election results. We describe the background of voter registration and turnout under the old system; discuss the debate surrounding the election law reform; and review the impact of the reform on turnout patterns.

*“[The government of Chile] expects wide-spread electoral participation from our citizens, and we are convinced that the next municipal election will be the election with the largest number of votes in the history of our country.”*

—Sebastián Piñera, president of Chile (Estrategia, 2012).

**I**N 2012, THE CHILEAN GOVERNMENT approved an election law reform that was intended to have a dramatic effect on Chile’s electorate in the proximate election. Prior to this, Chile, like most Latin American countries, had a compulsory voting law. Unique to Chile, however, was the use of compulsory voting in combination with voluntary registration. Although registration rates—and hence turnout—were extremely high immediately following the country’s transition to democracy in the late 1980s, registration and turnout sharply declined

over the course of the next two decades. This sparked major debates over election law reform, ultimately leading to the adoption of automatic registration and voluntary voting.

The implementation of automatic registration increased the size of the electorate from roughly 8 to 13.4 million registered voters; supporters of the reform advocated that this increase would be sufficient to boost turnout. Indeed, days before the first election under the new law, President Piñera touted that the 2012 municipal elections would have the highest turnout in Chile’s history (Estrategia, 2012). The president’s expectation is consistent with research that shows that lowering registration costs is often associated with higher turnout (Gimpel and Schuknecht, 2003; Vonnahme, 2012). Meanwhile, as with research that shows voluntary voting results in lower turnout rates than compulsory voting (Irwin, 1974; Singh, 2011), opponents feared that this transition would result in a dramatic drop-off

---

Tiffany D. Barnes is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, KY. Gabriela Rangel is a graduate student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, KY. The authors would like to thank Emily Beaulieu, Clayton Thyne, Bob Stein, the editor of *Election Law Journal*, and three anonymous reviewers for very useful comments.

in turnout. Consistent with the latter expectation, turnout dropped considerably in the two elections following the reform. Overall, given that turnout has important implications for the quality of democracy, the decision to adopt electoral reforms may have a lasting impact on both participation and legitimacy in Chile's democracy.

This electoral reform is of particular interest to scholars of electoral politics, who have had few opportunities to examine patterns of political participation under different voting systems within the same country. Indeed, Chile is one of only a few countries to ever abandon compulsory voting.<sup>1</sup> We take advantage of this recent reform to consider the pros and cons of electoral rules such as registration and voting requirements and to assess voter registration and turnout in Chile both before and after the reform. To do so, we first describe voter registration and turnout trends under Chile's previous voluntary registration and compulsory voting system.<sup>2</sup> Second, we discuss the pros and cons of the election law reform, and review the major change in electoral laws. We situate this discussion within the debate surrounding the decision to alter the electoral rules in Chile. Finally, we discuss the impact of the reform by examining participation patterns in the two most recent elections held under the new law.

### **VOLUNTARY REGISTRATION AND COMPULSORY VOTING: PRIOR TO REFORM, 1989–2011**

Leading up to the democratic transition in the late 1980s, Chile implemented an electoral system of voluntary registration and compulsory voting. Under this law, all Chilean citizens over the age of 18 (and qualified foreigners) were eligible to register to vote.<sup>3</sup> While registration was voluntary, all registered voters were required by law to vote (i.e., compulsory voting).<sup>4</sup> Although some countries with compulsory voting systems do not impose sanctions for voters who do not comply with the law, compulsory voting in Chile was enforced (International IDEA, 2010). Registered voters who abstained had to provide a legitimate excuse for not voting; otherwise they could face sanctions such as fines and possible imprisonment.

Despite the inconveniences of voluntary registration, registration rates were initially high due to contention surrounding the democratic referendum that

took place in 1988. The democratic opposition explicitly mobilized voters to register in an effort to defeat the Pinochet dictatorship in the late 1980s. Simultaneously, the incumbent administration marshaled their supporters to register to vote in the referendum. These combined efforts resulted in a 92 percent registration rate in the 1988 national plebiscite (Huneeus, 2005). Over the course of the next two decades, however, voter registration gradually declined.

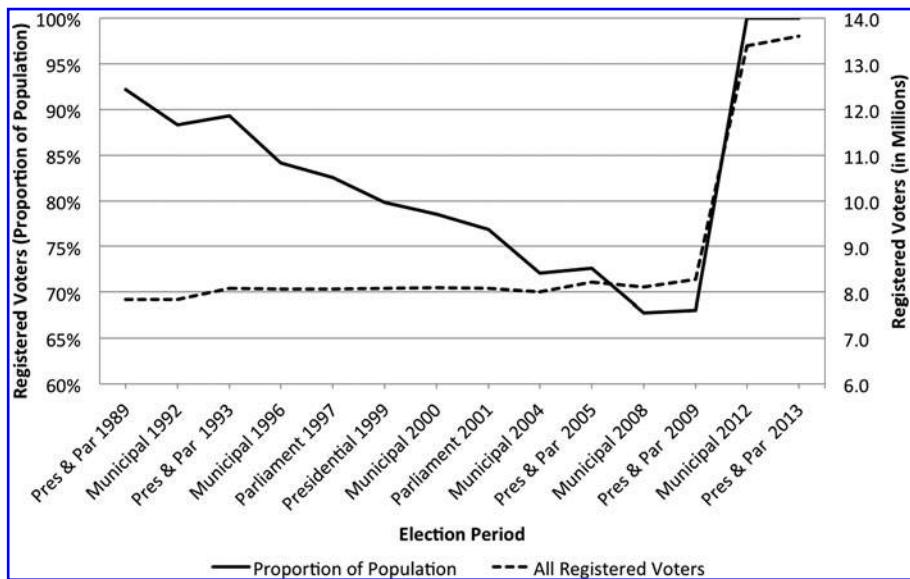
Figure 1 graphs registered voters as a proportion of the population on the left y-axis, the total number of registered voters on the right y-axis, and the electoral period on the x-axis. The figure demonstrates that registration rates fell from 92 percent of the total population in 1989, to 80 percent in 1999, and then to a low of 68 percent in 2009—the last presidential election prior to reform. Since individuals were only required to register once and remained registered for all subsequent elections, drops in total registration rates over the last three decades were largely due to the failure of newly eligible voters to register. To illustrate this point, Figure 2 graphs the composition of the electorate for each election, starting with the first democratic presidential election in 1989 through the most recent election in 2013. In the first presidential election in 1989, voters age 18 to 29 comprised 30 percent of the electorate, making them the largest age demographic registered to vote. Over the next two decades, as members of this cohort aged, and new cohorts of eligible voters did not register to vote, the proportion of voters age 18 to 29 dropped to a low of eight percent in the 2008 municipal elections. As a result, young cohorts of voters became severely underrepresented in the electorate, and older cohorts of voters, age 40 and older, were increasingly over represented. The low levels of registration among the youth were of particular concern to the government (Emol, 2012; Ruiz, 2012).

<sup>1</sup>The Netherlands switched from compulsory to voluntary voting in 1970; Venezuela and Italy made the transition to voluntary voting in 1993 (Lijphart, 1997; Gratschew, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>We define turnout as the proportion of the voting age population that cast a ballot in a given election, rather than the total number of votes cast.

<sup>3</sup>In order to register to vote, individuals were required to go in person to the registration office, present a valid national identity document, and have their name recorded in the national registry.

<sup>4</sup>Voluntary registration was established in Article 7 of the 1925 Constitution and carried over by Article 13 of the 1980 Constitution.

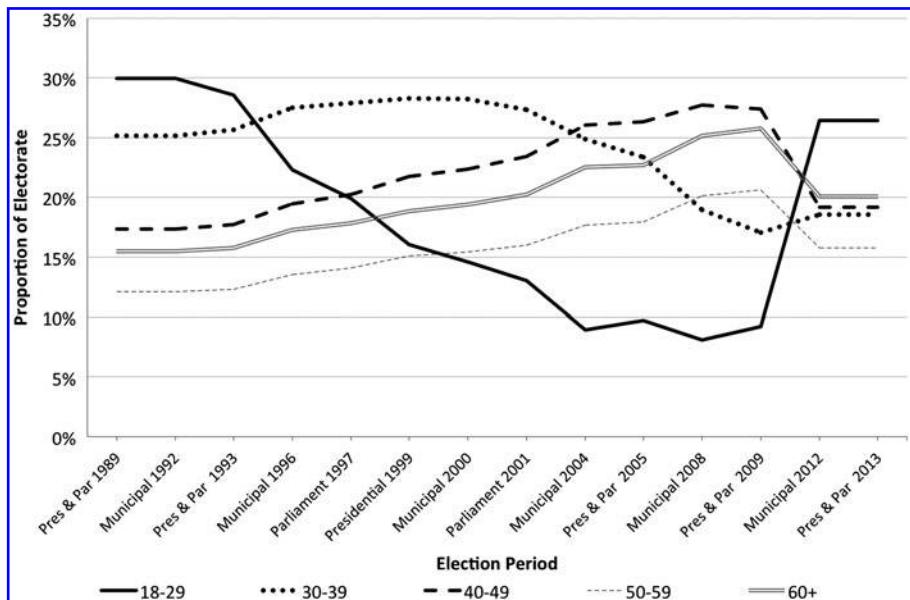


**FIG. 1.** Voter registration in Chile. The 2012 municipal election marks the adoption of automatic registration laws. Voter registration data were collected from the Servicio Electoral (Electoral Service) of Chile: <<http://www.servel.cl/>>.

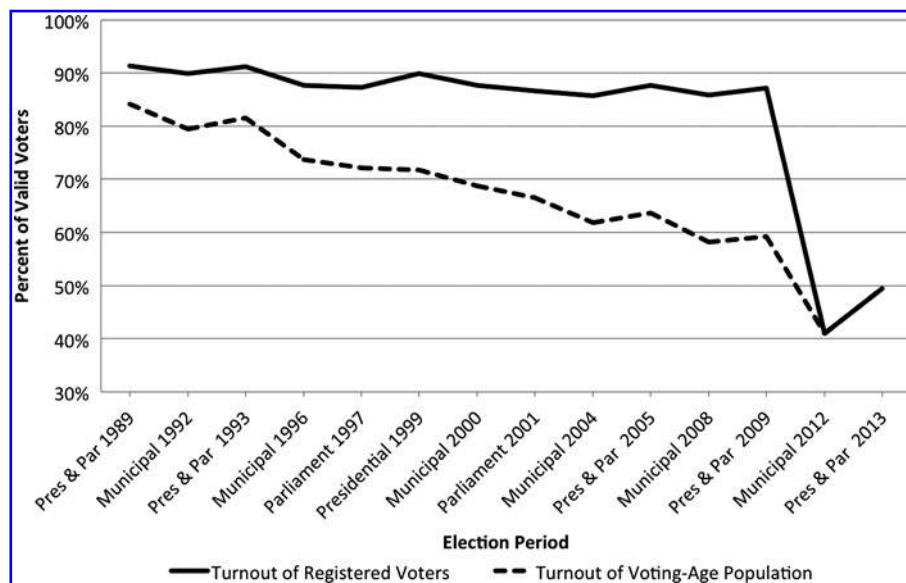
Meanwhile, voter turnout rates were also decreasing. Figure 3 graphs voter turnout as a proportion of registered voters (solid line) and as a proportion of the population aged 18 or older (dashed line). The figure illustrates that turnout fell among both the total population and among registered voters. Turnout dropped from 84 percent of the total population

(or 91 percent of registered voters) in the first presidential election in 1989 to 58 percent of the total population (or 86 percent of registered voters) in the presidential election prior to reform in 2009.

To address waning registration and participation rates, the Chilean government voted to abandon voluntary registration and compulsory voting in favor



**FIG. 2.** The composition of the Chilean electorate, by age. The 2012 municipal elections mark the adoption of automatic registration, which restored the composition of the electorate to reflect the Chilean population. Voter registration data were collected from the Servicio Electoral (Electoral Service) of Chile: <<http://www.servel.cl/>>.



**FIG. 3.** Voter turnout in Chile. The 2012 municipal elections mark the adoption of voluntary voting. Data for the total number of voters and registered voters were collected from the Servicio Electoral (Electoral Service) of Chile: <<http://www.servel.cl>>. Information on the voting age population was collected using census data from Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas of Chile (National Institute of Statistics) <<http://www.ine.cl>>.

of automatic registration and voluntary voting. There was a clear consensus among legislators that the switch from voluntary registration to an automatic system would be beneficial as a whole; the new law would incorporate approximately five million new voters, and it would integrate all young citizens into a system that was largely composed of an aging electorate (see Figure 2), with the goal of increasing turnout. While there was widespread support for automatic registration, there was considerable debate surrounding the decision to implement voluntary voting. In the section that follows, we discuss the pros and cons of different registration and voting requirements and highlight the major issues raised in the debate that took place in Chile leading up to the reform.

### THE DEBATE: THE PROS AND CONS OF ELECTION LAW REFORM

The proposal for the voluntary voting law was introduced in the Chilean Senate on December 1, 2010, and it was approved and passed in the Senate the following year on December 20, 2011.<sup>5</sup> During that year, several debates concerning the legislation took place in the House and Senate. In this section, we highlight the basics of the debate by providing

insight on the different views that were presented by the members of the government. In doing so, we discuss the literature that examines the impact of registration and compulsory laws on electoral participation respectively, and we situate the debate within the larger framework provided by the literature.

#### *Registration reform*

Historically, differences in registration requirements have attracted considerable interest among scholars of electoral participation. Registration requirements are shown to impact levels of participation by affecting the costs associated with voting (Kelley et al., 1967; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). From a rational-choice standpoint, voters consider the costs and benefits of voting in their decision to turn out, and only do so if the benefits outweigh the costs (Downs, 1957; Tullock, 1967). Registration laws that require individuals to register

<sup>5</sup>The process originally began with President Piñera introducing the bill to the Chilean Senate. The law was then sent to the Supreme Court for approval to modify the Constitution, which previously stated that voter registration was to be voluntary. After the Constitution was modified to accommodate the proposed law, the bill was sent back to the Senate and passed onto the House of Representatives. Amendments to the bill were made in the House and sent back to the Senate for final approval.

prior to the election impose inconveniences, as well as monetary and information costs on voters (Kelley et al., 1967; Powell, 1986; Vonnahme, 2012; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980), thereby increasing the overall costs of voting and reducing the likelihood that people turn out. When the cost of registration is low, however, voting becomes more attractive.

Previous research demonstrates that reforms that remove or relax registration requirements reduce the costs and inconveniences associated with voting and increase turnout (Gimpel and Schuknecht, 2003; Haspel and Knotts, 2005; Vonnahme, 2012).<sup>6</sup> For example, preregistration requirements (among other things) are attributed to lower turnout in the United States as compared to other industrialized democracies that employ automatic registration (Jackman, 1987; Powell, 1986). Consistent with cross-national research, studies on the U.S. find that shorter closing dates (i.e., allowing voters to register closer to the election) increase turnout (Burden et al., Forthcoming; Fournier et al., 2004; Gimpel et al., 2007). Moreover, Rosenstone and Wolfinger (1978) find that registration provisions, including absentee registration and longer office hours for registrars (e.g., evenings and weekends), are associated with greater turnout. In sum, research shows that turnout is higher when registration is more convenient and less costly. Given the well-established proposition that automatic registration is conducive to higher participation rates, the decision to move from a voluntary to an automatic registration system was highly consensual among Chilean politicians. In addition, automatic registration was intended to address two of the government's major concerns. First, the elimination of registration requirements led to the automatic incorporation of over five million new voters into the electorate. Second, it would automatically increase registration among the youth; under the old law, only eight percent of citizens aged 18–29 were registered to vote by 2009. With the adoption of automatic registration, this proportion rose to 26 percent of the electorate.

#### *Voluntary voting reform*

The most contested issue surrounding electoral reform was the shift from compulsory to voluntary voting. Similar to registration requirements, compulsory voting is also shown to impact participation. A plethora of studies indicate that when voting is man-

datory, penalties for not turning out increase the costs of *not* voting, as citizens are subject to fines or other negative repercussions (Brockington, 2004; Blais, 2000; Perea, 2002). Aside from this, citizens who abstain and get caught disobeying the law may incur social costs (Geys, 2006). By contrast, voluntary voting decreases the costs of abstaining, making voting less desirable. Because the costs of voting often outweigh the benefits, citizens are more likely to abstain when voting is voluntary (Downs, 1957).

Consistent with this logic, one of the most robust findings in the research on voter turnout is that compulsory voting is associated with higher turnout (Jackman, 1987; Geys, 2006). Multiple studies find a turnout bonus ranging from 10 to 15 percent in compulsory voting countries (Blais and Carty, 1990; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Franklin, 1996, 2004; Blais and Aarts, 2005). This effect is strongest when sanctions are in place (Blais et al., 2003) and strictly enforced (Panagopoulos, 2008; Singh, 2011).

In a cross-national study of Latin America—the region where compulsory voting is most prevalent—Fornos, Power, and Garand (2004) find a strong positive relationship between compulsory voting and turnout. Table 1 helps to illustrate this relationship by showing the turnout rates in 17 Latin American countries for the most recent presidential elections, as well as their use and enforcement of compulsory voting. For each country, column 3 indicates the type of voting system. Twelve of the 17 countries in Latin America use compulsory voting, and the remaining five countries use voluntary voting. In general, countries using compulsory voting exhibit higher levels of turnout. More specifically, seven out of nine countries that have turnout levels above 70 percent use compulsory voting systems. For example, countries such as Bolivia, Uruguay, Peru, and Ecuador all displayed turnout rates above 80 percent in the last presidential election under their compulsory voting systems. By contrast, the three countries to exhibit the lowest turnout rates (El Salvador, Chile, and Colombia) all currently employ voluntary voting systems.

To facilitate the comparison of compulsory voting across countries, we include a severity index

---

<sup>6</sup>For exceptions to this finding see Brown and Wedeking (2006), who find that the National Voter Registration Act in the U.S. increased pools of registered voters who were unlikely to vote and did not increase turnout.

TABLE 1. COMPULSORY VOTING AND TURNOUT  
ACROSS LATIN AMERICA

(1) <i>Country</i>	(2) <i>Most recent presidential election</i>	(3) <i>Voting system</i>	(4) <i>Severity of sanctions and enforcement</i>	(5) <i>Voter turnout</i>
Bolivia	2009	Compulsory	3	94.5%
Uruguay	2009	Compulsory	4	89.2%
Peru	2011	Compulsory	3	82.5%
Ecuador	2013	Compulsory	2	81.1%
Venezuela	2013	Voluntary	0	79.6%
Brazil	2010	Compulsory	2	78.5%
Argentina	2011	Compulsory	3	74.4%
Panama	2009	Compulsory	1	74.0%
Nicaragua	2011	Voluntary	0	71.8%
Paraguay	2013	Compulsory	2	68.0%
Mexico	2012	Compulsory	1	64.7%
Honduras	2013	Compulsory	1	61.2%
Guatemala	2011	Compulsory	1	60.8%
Costa Rica	2014	Compulsory	1	56.6%
El Salvador	2014	Voluntary	0	55.5%
Chile	2013	Voluntary	0	49.3%
Colombia	2010	Voluntary	0	44.5%

*Notes:* Column 5 reports turnout in the first round presidential election. We use the coding index for severity and enforcement of sanctions adapted by Singh (2011). Countries are coded as 0 if voting is not compulsory, 1 if voting is compulsory but enforcement is low and sanctions are weak, a 2 when compulsory voting is combined with moderate levels of enforcement and sanctions, 3 when either sanctions or enforcement is high, and a 4 when both are high. See Singh (2011) for a more detailed discussion.

*Source:* Turnout data were retrieved from <<http://www.electionguide.org>>. Data from Nicaragua were retrieved from <<http://www.idea.int/vt/>>. Compulsory voting and enforcement data were retrieved from <[http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory\\_voting.cfm](http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm)> and the index was adapted from Singh (2011).

developed by Singh (2011). The index rates countries' voting systems on a scale ranging from 0 to 4 based on the use of compulsory voting, the severity of sanctions, and the level of enforcement. Higher values of the index indicate stronger levels of enforcement and sanctions. Consistent with previous studies of compulsory voting (Panagopoulos, 2008; Singh, 2011), Table 1 suggests that the level of enforcement matters. All four countries that report turnout rates higher than 80 percent have moderate to severe levels of sanctions and enforcement. Conversely, the countries with compulsory voting that have reported relatively low levels of turnout (such as Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica) all have little to no enforcement. In fact, turnout rates in countries with compulsory voting and no enforcement are similar to those in countries with voluntary voting. Still, some exceptions apply. Both Venezuela and Nicaragua display high rates of turnout despite their voluntary voting sys-

tems, suggesting that these countries have been able to mobilize voters in contempt of rules that might discourage participation. While we cannot draw any conclusions from the table, systematic evidence does suggest that compulsory voting is associated with higher levels of turnout in Latin America (Fornos, Power, and Garand, 2004), and that this relationship holds in other parts of the world (Franklin, 1999; Singh, 2011).

Given that automatic registration and compulsory voting systems both tend to produce higher participation rates, the combination of these two electoral laws would likely maximize turnout (as compared to electoral systems that include voluntary voting and/or voluntary registration). In fact, the Chilean government strongly considered the option of retaining compulsory voting, but ultimately came down in favor of voluntary voting. The debate surrounding the shift from compulsory to voluntary voting was largely focused on the issue of voting as either a right or a civic duty. While many argue that no person should be forced to vote, others firmly believe it is a citizen's duty to participate in their country's elections.

Proponents of compulsory voting argue that the legitimacy of a government is founded on electoral participation. If every citizen is required to vote, then the elected government is truly representative and thus more legitimate. For this reason, some argue that it is a citizen's responsibility to be a part of the electoral process (International IDEA, 2010). Chilean Senator Sabag (Partido Demócrata Cristiano, Center-Left Coalition), for example, warned that voluntary voting could potentially weaken the relationship between citizens and the nation. He argued that if Chileans want the government to be accountable to their demands for better education, security, health, and higher standards of living, then they must fulfill their obligation to vote (Senado, 2011). If everyone is not required to vote, accountability between citizens and the government might be compromised.

On the other side of the spectrum, those who support voluntary voting argue that forcing one to vote is a violation of their freedom (a right that should be protected by democracy—not violated). In the past, countries with questionable democratic practices often attempted to influence citizens' decision to vote through the use of intimidation practices and other coercive actions (Malkopoulou, 2009). This type of political and social pressure has led many

citizens to negatively perceive the act of mandatory voting and to deem it undemocratic. With respect to Chile, for example, some reports indicate that illicit groups allegedly affiliated with candidates have attempted to intimidate voters or coercively influence their vote choice on election day (Crellin, 2012). In the Senate debate, opponents of compulsory voting argue that forcing citizens to participate against their will may provoke resentment, which could discourage civic engagement and political education (Senado, 2011). For this reason, Gratschew (2004) suggests that it is less likely that countries will consider adopting compulsory voting today given the spread of liberal and democratic principles around the world.

Another drawback of compulsory voting is that it may lead to an increase in the amount of invalid and random votes, since part of the electorate might become resentful or uninterested, which arguably decreases the legitimacy of the elected government (International IDEA, 2010). In the Senate debate, Senator Navarro (Movimiento Amplio Social, Left) highlighted the need for the government to actively engage the electorate rather than requiring them to vote; higher turnout could be achieved by creating a system in which the Chilean people feel they are part of and they can voluntarily participate in an effort to influence government decisions (Senado, 2011).

Aside from the discussion of right vs. duty, another concern that was invoked when considering the reform was the fear that voter turnout may plummet under a voluntary voting system. Senator Zaldívar (Partido Demócrata Cristiano, Center-Left Coalition) brought up this issue when arguing against the new bill, stating that “the previous experience of different countries that established voluntary voting systems teaches us that in the end, participation is lower each time around” (Senado, 2011). Indeed, extant research shows that turnout decreases when countries implement voluntary voting systems (Irwin, 1974). For example, when the Netherlands switched from compulsory to voluntary voting in 1970, turnout decreased from 94.6 percent to 74.1 percent (Irwin, 1974). Most importantly, youth turnout (ages 21 to 29) fell considerably (from 93.5 percent to 61.4 percent). This statistic is especially alarming in the context of Chile, since increased youth turnout was one of the major goals the government aimed to achieve by changing voting systems.

A final topic discussed in Senate debate is the role of political campaigns. It is likely that the

cost of mobilizing the electorate to vote is higher when voting is voluntary than when voting is mandatory (Huneeus, 2008). Senator Espiña (Renovación Nacional, Center-Right Coalition), however, argued that the electorate would benefit more from voluntary voting because it would encourage politicians to become more responsive to constituents’ concerns. This is because political parties would have to mobilize constituents to vote. To effectively do so, Espiña argued that they would “first need to reach out to the youth—something that today does not matter since they are not registered—and second, politicians will have to make their propositions more attractive and the elections sufficiently competitive to encourage participation.” By this logic, voluntary voting may actually strengthen the relationship between democracy and accountability.

#### *Adoption and implementation*

Ultimately, the Senate approved the new law in December of 2011. Twenty-five of the thirty-eight senators voted in favor of the law, eight voted against it, and three abstained (Senado, 2011).<sup>7</sup> The partisan distribution of votes suggests that the debate was partially fueled by partisan politics: all eight senators who voted against the reform and the three who abstained were members of the center-left coalition (Concertación), and all present members of the center-right coalition (Alianza) voted for the reform to pass. In the end, the Alianza was able to garner enough support from the opposition and the independent senators in order to pass the reform with about 66 percent of the vote. The new law was officially adopted in January of 2012.

During the following three months, the electoral registry was updated to include all eligible voters.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>When the Chamber of Deputies voted to approve the final modifications to the election law reform on December 14, 2011, only one Deputy, a member of the Alianza, voted in opposition.

<sup>8</sup>Before, citizens had to undergo a tedious bureaucratic process to register to vote; automatic registration has streamlined this process. Now, all citizens over the age of 18 residing in Chile are registered to vote, as well as eligible foreigners. According to the constitution, to be eligible to vote, foreigners must have had legal residency status for at least five years and be 18 years of age or older. Residents who are 17 years old, but will turn 18 on or before the election day are included in the national registry. Chileans living abroad who wish to vote must return to Chile and vote in person. There is no absentee voting.

The government also made efforts to inform voters of the new electoral law. For example, during April and May, all newly registered voters received a letter from the government informing them of their inclusion into the electoral national registry and providing information on the specific voting location assigned to each voter. Further, the main national newspapers *La Tercera* and *El Mercurio* covered the reform process and reported extensively on the new rules leading up to the election. Other efforts to mobilize voters to understand the new law included web-based and twitter movements that were endorsed by famous Chilean actors and writers, such as the *Vota Tú Decides* campaign.<sup>9</sup> The government made multiple public service announcements that contained information about the new law and key dates detailing how and when the new system would be implemented. To facilitate the process and encourage turnout, the government allowed citizens to change their voting location if they wished, in hopes that increased convenience would encourage voters to participate.<sup>10</sup>

### TURNOUT PATTERNS UNDER THE NEW SYSTEM

As of today, Chile has held two elections under the new electoral system. The first election under the new law took place in October of 2012, as Chileans voted in the mayoral and city council elections. In November of 2013, Chile held its first presidential and congressional elections under the new voluntary voting system. This section first compares voter registration pre and post-reform. Specifically, we consider how the reform changed the composition of the electorate. Then, we discuss pre and post-reform patterns of turnout. In doing so, we consider both national and regional trends in turnout, as well as turnout among the youth. Moreover, we explicitly compare turnout patterns in the 2012 municipal elections to previous municipal elections; likewise, we compare turnout in the 2013 presidential election to previous presidential elections.

#### *Registration rates*

The municipal election on October 28, 2012 marked the first time in which the entire Chilean population was automatically registered to vote, and could do so voluntarily. As intended, the adop-

tion and implementation of automatic registration resulted in two significant changes in the Chilean electorate. First, because automatic registration by definition includes all eligible voters, it significantly increased the size of the electorate from 8 million to 13.4 million eligible voters. Since the transition to democracy, voter registration had fallen from 92 percent of the voting age population in 1989 to 68 percent in 2009 (see Figure 1). Second, automatic registration restored the composition of the electorate to reflect the population. By early 2000, the cohort age 40 to 49 comprised the largest proportion of the electorate (27 percent of all registered voters in 2009, up from 17 percent in 1989), making this cohort significantly overrepresented. By contrast, the cohort age 18 to 29 was significantly underrepresented and comprised the smallest proportion of the electorate (9 percent in 2009, down from 30 percent in 1989). After the transition to automatic registration, the cohort age 40 to 49 comprised only 19 percent of the electorate in the 2012 municipal elections and the cohort age 18 to 29 made up 26 percent of the electorate. These high levels of voter registration were sustained in the 2013 presidential election. Indeed, the purpose of automatic registration is to ensure that the electorate encompasses the entire pool of eligible voters.

#### *National trends in turnout*

With the reform, turnout dropped dramatically in both the 2012 and 2013 elections as compared to previous elections at the same level. Compare, for example, turnout rates in the municipal elections pre and post election law reform as depicted in Figure 3. Participation rates declined from 58 percent of the population (or 86 percent of registered voters as depicted by the solid line in Figure 3) in 2008, to 41 percent in 2012.<sup>11</sup> The dashed line in Figure 3 indicates that turnout as a proportion of eligible voters has been declining over the past two decades. The adoption of voluntary voting may have exasperated this trend.

<sup>9</sup>Information available at <<http://www.acuerdos.cl/votovoluntario/voto/>>.

<sup>10</sup>New electors had until June 30, 2012 to request a change of voting district location, and could do so by going to any electoral registration office in the country.

<sup>11</sup>In terms of total votes, turnout decreased from 6,959,075 votes in 2008 to 5,495,929 in 2012, a decrease of 1,463,146 votes. Data retrieved from: <<http://www.servel.cl>>.

Turning next to the comparison of turnout in presidential elections pre and post reform, a similar decline in turnout is observed. Specifically, in the 2009 presidential elections (under the old law), 59 percent of eligible voters (or 87 percent of registered voters) turned out to vote (see Figure 3). In 2013, under voluntary voting, only 49 percent of eligible voters turned out.<sup>12</sup> This represents a 10 percent decline in turnout among eligible voters. While the drop in turnout between municipal elections held before and after the reform was almost 20 percent, the decline between presidential elections was much smaller. This should not be surprising given that presidential elections are often more salient than subnational elections. A poll conducted by Mori (a polling company in Chile) and the Chilean Association of Municipalities prior to the municipal election reported that about 41 percent of Chileans considered the 2012 municipal elections to be irrelevant (MercoPress, 2012a). This sentiment is also reflected in historical registration rates. For example, there was never a rise in registration rates in Chile prior to municipal elections, but there was always a small bump in registration prior to presidential elections (see Figure 1). Thus, it seems reasonable that turnout was slightly higher in the 2013 presidential elections than in the 2012 municipal elections. In the section that follows, we provide additional insights regarding the variation in turnout before and after reform by examining turnout at the regional level.

#### *Regional trends in turnout*

To go beyond changes in the aggregate, we examine turnout across the 15 regions in Chile. Specifically, we compare change in turnout by region for both municipal and presidential elections. Table 2 lists turnout by region for the municipal and presidential elections prior to the reform and the elections immediately following the reform. Turnout is calculated as the percentage of eligible voters in 2013.<sup>13</sup> For each election type, we calculate the difference in turnout pre and post-reform. Columns 5 and 8 list the change in turnout between the 2008 and 2012 municipal elections and the 2009 and 2013 presidential elections, respectively.

First, turning to the municipal elections, turnout was above 40% in every region in Chile in the 2008 election. In 2012, turnout dropped below 40% in a number of regions, although there was notable

variation across different regions. As column 4 indicates, Arica y Parinacota, the most northern region in Chile, and Magallanes, the most southern region, exhibited the lowest turnout rates at 32.89 percent and 30.62 percent in 2012, respectively. By contrast, turnout was roughly 20 percentage points higher in Maule and O'Higgins, which had rates of 51.28 percent and 49.28 percent, respectively. This variation across regions in 2012 suggests that other factors (e.g., demographic, political, or institutional factors) also may have influenced the levels of turnout (Barnes and Rangel, 2014).

Large variation is also present if we consider the change in turnout from the 2008 elections under the old system to the most recent municipal elections under voluntary voting (column 5). Magallanes displayed the largest decline in turnout, going from 41.85 percent in 2008 to 30.62 percent in 2012 (11.23 percent drop). Two other regions that exhibited a substantial decline in turnout were Chile's most urban and populated regions, Metropolitana de Santiago and Valparaíso; both experienced drops of 8.62 percent and 8.56 percent, respectively. Meanwhile, other regions exhibited much smaller declines in rates of participation. Los Lagos saw a 3.58 percent decline in turnout, whereas Maule recorded only a slight drop of 1.81 percent from 2008 to 2012. Though there was wide variation in the magnitude of the change, all regions displayed drops in average turnout rates, indicating that turnout was consistently lower under the new system in 2012.

Next, turning to presidential elections, similar patterns are observed. In the 2009 presidential elections (under the old law), turnout was consistently above 45 percent in every region of the country. In 2013, under the new system, six out of 15 regions exhibited turnout rates lower than 45 percent, including a low of 38.79 percent in Tarapacá. While the largest rate of turnout in 2009 was

---

<sup>12</sup>The total number of votes for presidential elections dropped from 7,264,136 votes in 2009 to 6,699,011 in 2013, a decrease of 565,125 votes. Data retrieved from: <<http://www.electionresources.org>>.

<sup>13</sup>We use the percentage of eligible voters in 2013 to calculate turnout by region for each election. Statistics on the voting eligible population are not available by region for 2008, 2009, and 2012. This table allows us to see that changes in turnout were not consistent across regions, but given that the voting eligible population has increased over this period our calculations for regional turnout underestimate the turnout rates in the 2008, 2009, and 2012 elections.

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF ELECTORAL RESULTS BY REGION

(1) <i>Region</i>	(2) <i>Region size VEP (2013)</i>	(3) <i>Turnout municipal (2008)</i>	(4) <i>Turnout municipal (2012)</i>	(5) <i>Change in turnout 2008–2012</i>	(6) <i>Turnout presidential (2009)</i>	(7) <i>Turnout presidential (2013)</i>	(8) <i>Change in turnout 2009–2013</i>
Antofagasta	419,001	40.57%	34.65%	-5.92%	47.46%	42.16%	-5.29%
Araucanía	812,478	46.66%	44.02%	-2.64%	51.85%	48.01%	-3.84%
Arica y Parinacota	173,855	42.68%	32.89%	-9.79%	47.48%	40.95%	-6.54%
Atacama	221,606	46.59%	41.01%	-5.58%	51.71%	44.75%	-6.97%
Aysén	90,538	43.22%	39.34%	-3.88%	48.30%	41.67%	-6.63%
Biobío	1,638,968	51.12%	46.62%	-4.50%	57.33%	52.10%	-5.23%
Coquimbo	538,805	46.52%	40.95%	-5.57%	51.53%	48.21%	-3.32%
Los Lagos	669,118	45.64%	42.06%	-3.58%	51.94%	46.91%	-5.02%
Los Ríos	324,037	48.44%	44.08%	-4.36%	53.85%	49.91%	-3.94%
Magallanes	153,628	41.85%	30.62%	-11.23%	46.96%	40.76%	-6.20%
Maule	809,528	53.09%	51.28%	-1.81%	58.48%	54.11%	-4.36%
Metropolitana de Santiago	5,326,912	45.86%	37.24%	-8.62%	52.29%	49.90%	-2.39%
O'Higgins	699,594	53.71%	49.28%	-4.43%	59.27%	52.39%	-6.88%
Tarapacá	222,024	43.11%	37.79%	-5.32%	45.33%	38.79%	-6.55%
Valparaíso	1,473,051	48.96%	40.40%	-8.56%	55.49%	49.10%	-6.39%

Notes: Column 2 reports the voting eligible population (VEP). Turnout for each election is calculated as a proportion of the VEP in 2013.

Source: Municipal level data are based on the mayoral election and were retrieved from the Servicio Electoral (Electoral Service) of Chile: <<http://www.servel.cl/>>. National level data are based on the presidential election and were retrieved from <<http://www.electionresources.org/cl/>>.

59.27 percent in O'Higgins, the high for 2013 was only 54.11 percent in Maule. A closer look at column 8 also indicates that the change in turnout between 2009 and 2013 was negative for all regions. Seven regions displayed drops larger than 6 percent, including a 6.88 percent drop in O'Higgins. The smallest decline took place in the Metropolitana de Santiago region, where 2.39 percent less people turned out to vote in the presidential elections of 2013 compared to the 2009 elections. Thus, similar to the pattern observed for municipal elections, turnout rates were systematically lower in the 2013 presidential elections under the new voluntary voting system than under the previous presidential elections held in 2009 under the old compulsory rules.

#### *Turnout among the youth*

As previously discussed, one of the primary motivations of the election law reform was to increase participation among the youth in Chile. Prior to the reform, only eight percent of citizens age 18–29 were registered to vote. The new automatic registration law drastically changed the electorate's demographics—the percentage of young voters in the electorate increased substantially to 26.9 percent in 2012. Now, one out of four potential voters are under the age of 30. Thus, automatic registration successfully increased the number of young voters who became automatically eligible to vote.

The impact of the new law on turnout, however, is more difficult to assess. The Chilean National Institute for Youth (INJUV, 2012) conducted extensive surveys prior to both the 2012 municipal and 2013 presidential elections to gauge the implications of the reform for youth political participation. When asked about their perceptions on how turnout would change given the new law, 39 percent of responders suggested that turnout among the youth would increase, while 32 percent said it would remain the same. But, when respondents were asked if they personally intended to vote in the 2012 municipal elections, only 33 percent said that they would turn out, about 45 percent said they did not intend to participate, and others refrained from responding or were unsure about their intentions to vote.

Despite the intentions to vote reported in the pre-election survey, in a post-election survey conducted by INJUV (2013) only 23 percent of the youth reported that they did in fact turn out in the 2012 municipal elections.<sup>14</sup> This was a considerable improvement from previous participation rates among the youth that failed to achieve 10 percent, but the increase was not as large as leaders had hoped. Further, 47 percent of the youth who chose not to vote said the reason why they abstained was because they are not interested in politics. This

<sup>14</sup>Official turnout results are not available broken down by age.

lack of political interest raises concerns about future rates of political engagement amongst the youth.

Similar patterns were observed in the 2013 presidential elections. While no information on actual youth turnout is available, a recent study conducted by INJUV (2013) suggests that participation levels were slightly higher than in 2012, likely due to the increased salience of presidential elections. When asked if they would vote in the 2013 presidential elections, 27 percent of respondents reported that they would vote, and 44 percent reported they would abstain. Taken together, although average turnout rates among the youth did increase from less than 10 percent to about 20 percent (according to INJUV), this increase might not have met the optimistic expectations projected by Chileans politicians who advocated for the reform.

#### *Partisan turnout patterns*

The Chilean political party system is generally characterized as having two stable and cohesive coalitions that facilitate electoral coordination prior to subnational and national elections. The *Concertación por la Democracia* is the center-left coalition, and the *Alianza por Chile* is the center-right coalition.<sup>15</sup> In 2009, the Alianza (center-right coalition) took control of the presidency for the first time after Chile's transition to democracy in 1989. The 2012 municipal elections marked the first election since the change in political power from the center-left to the center-right. The results of the most recent municipal and presidential elections, however, suggest a shift in support away from the president's party and back towards the center-left. In 2008, prior to the reform, the Alianza secured the largest share of mayoral posts (144 posts compared to 101 posts secured by the center-left Concertación) and went on to win the presidency in 2009. In 2012, after the reform, the proportion of seats won by the Alianza (electoral pact Coalición por el Cambio) dropped to 121 posts or 35.07 percent of the total posts. The center-left opposition, the Concertación, won more posts, increasing its share of mayoral posts from 101 in 2008 to 186 in the 2012 election. In 2013, the Concertación took back the presidency and won an additional nine seats in the lower chamber, increasing their seat share from 47 percent after the 2009 election to 55 percent in 2013. The Alianza, by contrast, lost seven seats in the lower chamber in 2013, decreas-

ing their overall seat share from 48 percent in 2009 to 43 percent.

One question to emerge from the election law reform is whether the reform provided partisan benefits to either of the two main electoral coalitions. Some media reports suggest that the Alianza's losses are largely a result of waning support for President Piñera, particularly in open races (MercoPress, 2012b); meanwhile, others suggest that in 2012 a select handful of upsets were due to low turnout in those municipalities (Navia, 2012). While each of these explanations is possible, we cannot disentangle the effect of turnout and citizens' support for the incumbent government by looking at few electoral upsets.

In attempt to shed more light on this relationship, we examine the correlation between turnout in each district (municipal districts in 2012 and congressional districts in 2013) and the proportion of votes cast for each party in that district. The data show that the overall correlation between turnout and support for either political party is weak. In the 2008 elections, the correlation between turnout and support for the Alianza was only 0.04. In comparison, turnout was slightly negatively correlated with support for the Concertación at -0.15. In the 2013 Congressional elections, turnout is positively correlated with support for the Alianza at 0.39 and the correlation between turnout and support for the Concertación is only 0.09. While it is possible that patterns of turnout may have had a partisan effect, a more systematic analysis is needed to draw conclusions about the relationship between turnout and benefits to specific political parties. Moreover, given the limited number of post-reform elections that have taken place, it may be too soon to conclude the reform had any significant effects on the electoral support for either political coalition.

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, some clear trends emerged in the aftermath of the election law reform in Chile. Turnout dropped to an all time low in the 2012 municipal elections following the reform. This decline sparked

---

<sup>15</sup>In the 2012 municipal elections, the Concertación ran as two separate pacts, the *Concertación Democrática* and the *Por un Chile Justo*. In the 2013 presidential elections, the Concertación ran as the *Nueva Mayoría*.

considerable concern among politicians in Chile, including President Piñera, who claimed that the high rate of abstentions is a “warning sign” for Chile’s democracy (Vergara, 2012). Following the 2012 election, media sources reported that the extremely low rate of participation represented society’s overall waning satisfaction with politics (Ulmer and De la Jara, 2012). The 2013 presidential election saw a slight bump in comparison to the previous municipal election, but turnout still represented the lowest on record for a democratic presidential election in Chile. While turnout was higher in some regions than others, the general trend of decline was persistent across every region in Chile for both post-reform elections. Finally, the one apparent success of the reform is that turnout among the youth increased in the 2012 and 2013 elections. Turnout among the youth is still low, but in 2012 it was approximately 13 percent higher than the proportion of the cohort that was registered to vote prior to the reform.

The adoption of automatic registration was an important step in restoring the composition of the electorate to reflect the Chilean population. Abandoning compulsory voting, however, appears to have resulted in dramatic decreases in electoral participation nationwide. Yet, it remains unclear what the long-term implications of the voting reform will be. For example, given the high proportion of young voters who report not being interested in politics, it remains to be seen how voluntary voting will affect political participation among this cohort in the long run. Additionally, previous research raises concerns regarding how well marginalized groups in society are represented when voluntary voting is in place. Specifically, poor and uneducated populations are more likely to abstain when voting is voluntary (Lijphart, 1997). Indeed, a study of aggregate level data from the Santiago Metropolitan Region (Metropolitana de Santiago region) conducted by the Observatorio Politico-Electoral found that turnout in the 2012 municipal elections was higher in wealthier municipalities. This finding suggests that a similar trend might be present at the individual level. If it is the case that voluntary voting depresses turnout among particular groups, political parties might have incentives to cater to subsets of the population, possibly resulting in unrepresentative policy outcomes. On balance, while this reform appears to enhance some aspects of democracy by giving citizens the freedom to choose to participate, it may

come at a cost in terms of who gets represented and what types of policies are ultimately advanced.

## REFERENCES

- Barnes, Tiffany D., and Gabriela Rangel. 2014. “Subnational Patterns of Participation: Compulsory Voting and the Conditional Impact of Institutional Design.” Working Paper.
- Blais, André. 2000. *To Vote or Not to Vote?: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory*. University of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh.
- Blais André, and K. Carty. 1990. “Does Proportional Representation Foster Voter Turnout?” *European Journal of Political Research*, 18(2), 167–181.
- Blais, André, and Agnieszka Dobrzynska. 1998. “Turnout in Electoral Democracies.” *European Journal of Political Research*, 33(2), 239–261.
- Blais André, Louis Massicotte, Agnieszka Dobrzynska. 2003. *Why is Turnout Higher in Some Countries than in Others?* Ottawa: Elections Canada.
- Brockington, David. 2004. “The Paradox of Proportional Representation: The Effect of Party Systems and Coalitions on Individuals’ Electoral Participation.” *Political Studies*, 52(3), 469–490.
- Brown, Robert. D., and Wedeking, Justin. 2006. “People Who Have Their Tickets But Do Not Use Them: ‘Motor Voter,’ Registration, and Turnout Revisited.” *American Politics Research*, 34(4), 479–504.
- Burden, Barry C., David T. Canon, Kenneth R. Mayer, and Donald P. Moynihan. Forthcoming. “Election Laws, Mobilization, and Turnout: The Unanticipated Consequences of Election Reform.” *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Crellin, Olivia. 2012. “Elections in Chile: An Outlook from Santiago.” *America’s Quarterly*. October 27, 2012. Available at <<http://www.americasquarterly.org/content/elections-chile-outlook-santiago>>.
- Downs, A. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Emol. 2012. “Municipales 2012: Injuv Lanza Campaña Para Superar el Millón de Jóvenes Votantes.” October 5, 2012. Available at <<http://www.emol.com/noticias/nacional/2012/10/05/563363/municipals...injuv-lanza-campana-para-superar-el-millon-de-jovenes-votantes.html>>.
- Estrategia. 2012. “Piñera y Municipales 2012: Va a Ser la Elección Con Mayor Número de Votos en la Historia.” *Estrategia*. November 7, 2012. Available at <[http://www.estategia.cl/detalle\\_noticia.php?cod=66653](http://www.estategia.cl/detalle_noticia.php?cod=66653)>.
- Fournier, Patrick, Richard Nadeau, André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, and Neil Nevitte. 2004. “Time-of-Voting Decision and Susceptibility to Campaign Effects.” *Electoral Studies*, 23(4), 661–681.
- Franklin, Mark. 1996. “Electoral Participation in Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective.” In *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*, edited by Lawrence LeDuc, Richard Niemi, and Pippa Norris. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Franklin, Mark. 2004. *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies Since 1945*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Fornos, Carolina, Timothy J. Power, and James C. Garand. 2004. "Explaining Voter Turnout in Latin America, 1980 to 2000." *Comparative Political Studies*, 37(8), 909–940.
- Geys, Benny. 2006. "Explaining Voter Turnout: A Review of Aggregate-level Research." *Electoral Studies*, 25(4), 637–663.
- Gimpel, James G., and Jason E. Schuknecht. 2003. "Political Participation and the Accessibility of the Ballot Box." *Political Geography*, 22(4), 471–88.
- Gimpel, James, Joshua J. Dick, and Daron R. Shaw. 2007. "Election-year Stimuli and the Timing of Voter Registration." *Party Politics*, 13(3), 351–374.
- Gratschew, Maria. 2004. "Compulsory Voting in Western Europe." In *Voter Turnout in Western Europe*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). Available at <[http://www.idea.int/publications/voter\\_turnout\\_wEurope/](http://www.idea.int/publications/voter_turnout_wEurope/)>.
- Haspel, Moshe, and H. Gibbs Knotts. 2005. "Location, Location, Location: Precinct Placement and the Costs of Voting." *Journal of Politics*, 67(2), 560–73.
- Huneeus, Carlos. 2005. "Chile: A System Frozen by Elite Interests." In *Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook*, edited by Andrew Reynolds, Ben Reilly, and Andrew Ellis. Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA.
- International IDEA. 2012. "Compulsory Voting." International IDEA. Available at: <[http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory\\_voting.cfm](http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm)>.
- INJUV. 2012. "Disposición y Actitudes Hacia el Sistema de Representación Política." *Ministerio de Desarrollo Social*.
- INJUV. 2013. "Conocimiento y Participación en Primarias Presidenciales." *Ministerio de Desarrollo Social*.
- Irwin, Galen. 1974. "Compulsory Voting Legislation: Impact on Voter Turnout in the Netherlands." *Comparative Political Studies*, 7(3): 292–315.
- Jackman, Robert W. 1987. "Political Institutions and Voter Turnout in the Industrial Democracies." *American Political Science Review*, 81, 405–424.
- Kelley, Stanley Jr., Richard E. Ayres, and William G. Bowen. 1967. "Registration and Voting: Putting First Things First." *American Political Science Review*, 61(2), 359–379.
- Lijphart, Arend. 1997. "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma." *American Political Science Review*, 91(1), 1–14.
- Malkopoulou, Anthoula. 2009. "Lost Voters: Participation in EU Elections and the Case for Compulsory Voting." *Center for European Policy Studies*.
- MercoPress. 2012a. "First Voluntary Vote at Municipal Elections in Chile; Fears of a Low Turnout." *MercoPress South Atlantic News Agency*. October 26, 2012.
- MercoPress 2012b. "Chilean Municipal Elections Are Anticipating a Return of the Left Wing Coalition." *MercoPress South Atlantic News Agency*. October 31, 2012.
- Navia, Patricio. 2012. "Chile's Municipal Elections: Everyone Loses, but the Ruling Coalition Loses More." *America's Quarterly*, November 2012. <<http://www.americasquarterly.org/Chile-municipal-elections-everyone-loses-but-the-ruling-coalition-loses-more>>.
- Observatorio Político-Electoral. 2013. *Los Ricos También Votan. Participación Electoral Segundo Nivel Socioeconómico de las Comunas en la Región Metropolitana*. Santiago, Chile: Universidad Diego Portales.
- Panagopoulos, Costas. 2008. The Calculus of Voting in Compulsory Voting Systems." *Political Behavior*, 30(4), 455–467.
- Perea, Eva. A. 2002. "Individual Characteristics, Institutional Incentives and Electoral Abstention in Western Europe." *European Journal of Political Research*, 41(5), 643–673.
- Powell, G. Bingham, Jr. 1986. "American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective." *American Political Science Review*, 80(1), 17–43.
- Rosenstone, Steven J., and Raymond E. Wolfinger. 1978. "The Effect of Registration Laws on Voter Turnout." *American Political Science Review*, 72(1), 22–45.
- Ruiz, Daniela. 2012. "Municipales 2012: Con el 60% triunfa la Abstención." October 28, 2012. Available at <<http://radio.uchile.cl/2012/10/28/municipales-2012-mayoria-de-mesas-constituidas-y-alta-abstencion-jovenil-en-la-region-metropolitana>>.
- Senado, Republica de Chile. 2012. "Tercero Transmite Constitucional." 82nd Session, Leg. 359. December 20, 2011.
- Singh, Shane. 2011. "How Compelling is Compulsory Voting? A Multilevel Analysis of Turnout." *Political Behavior*, 33(1), 95–111.
- Tullock, Gordon. 1967. *Towards a Mathematics of Politics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Ulmer, Alexandra, and Antonio De la Jara. 2012. "Chile's Right Suffers in Local Election, Presidency Eyed." *Thomson Reuters*. October 29, 2012.
- Vergara, Eva. 2012. "Chile: Allende's Granddaughter Wins Her First Race." *Associated Press*. October 29, 2012.
- Vonnahme, Greg. 2012. "Registration Deadlines and Turnout in Context." *Political Behavior*, 34(4), 765–779.
- Wolfinger, Raymond. E., and Steven J. Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Address correspondence to:  
**Tiffany D. Barnes**  
*Department of Political Science*  
*University of Kentucky*  
*1615 Patterson Office Towers*  
*Lexington, KY 40506-0027*

E-mail: tiffanydbarnes@uky.edu