

## RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY, COMMUNITY MOBILITY, AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

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**This article investigates why Americans who move have lower voter turnout than those who stay put. Two hypotheses are drawn from the political science literature. One emphasizes the need to register at one's new address in order to vote. The other locates the cause of lower turnout in the disruption of social connections that results from moving. By distinguishing those who change residences within their communities from those who move outside of their communities, I test the hypotheses. The findings show that both types of moves affect turnout. However, changing residences appears to be more important than changing communities. Thus it appears that the explanation for the relationship between moving and turnout derives more from the need to register after moving than the disruption of social ties.**

Americans who move have lower voter turnout than those who stay put.<sup>1</sup> This widely accepted observation has engendered a number of interpretations, none of which has been convincingly supported. This article lays out the rival hypotheses, explains why previous tests are inadequate, and then proceeds to develop and estimate a model to assess the competing claims.

There are two primary explanations for the negative effect of mobility on turnout. One hypothesis points to the precursor to voting, registration. Often a low priority, especially well in advance of election day when the registration books close in many states, the need to register is not a trivial cost. Because everyone who moves must register at their new address in order to vote, their turnout is expected to be lower than that of those who have not moved. "The requirement that citizens must register anew after each change in residence constitutes the key stumbling block in the trip to the polls" (Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass, 1987, p. 45). The longer people have lived in their homes, the more time they have to register.

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The second hypothesis explains movers' lower turnout by emphasizing the social disconnection that accompanies mobility. Moving, "like frequent replotting of plants, tends to disrupt root systems, and it takes time for an uprooted individual to put down new roots" (Putnam, 1995, p. 30). Applied to the question of electoral participation, this leads to the belief that "a good part of the positive effect of staying—that is, of *not* moving—on turnout has to do with the sense of community 'rootedness' that develops with a long stay in the same residence" (Teixeira, 1992, p. 119n). Instead of interpreting the lower turnout of movers in the strictly political sense of the need to reregister, this explanation sees the phenomenon as one manifestation of a larger set of social consequences that results from moving. As Conway (1991) writes, "[i]t is, rather, the social consequences of mobility that are now important" (p. 19).

Assessing the validity of these two hypotheses for the relationship between mobility and turnout extends beyond the general goal of developing accurate explanations.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that movers' turnout is depressed by the need to reregister, then policies like election-day registration and the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, which reduce the costs of voting by making registration easier, will be effective. However, if movers fail to vote because of social disconnection, then such policies will be largely ineffective at improving voter turnout.

Another reason to distinguish the effects derives from the observation, reported below, that the need to reregister as a result of moving occurs far more frequently than the disruption of community attachments. Separating the contribution of each factor is helpful, then, to account for the effect of mobility on the overall level of turnout in the United States.

## RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY AND COMMUNITY MOBILITY

To analyze the relationship between mobility and turnout I distinguish two types of moves. Residential mobility refers to moving from one home to another. Community mobility refers to moving from one community to another. The significance of the distinction becomes apparent with a hypothetical example. Two people have always lived in the same city and consequently have had ample time to develop social connections and ties to the community. One has recently moved to a new home in the same neighborhood and must, therefore, register at her new address in order to vote. The other, having lived in the same home for many years, has had considerably more time to register. If the need to reregister at one's new address decreases turnout, then moving within one's community will lower turnout. Moreover, any observed relationship between residential mobility and turnout cannot be attributed to the disruption of community ties among people like the two described above because they have lived in their communities for similar amounts of time. The fact that

residential mobility does not always entail community mobility allows the effects of the former to be estimated while controlling for the latter.<sup>3</sup>

Another example suggests how to estimate the effect of disrupted social connections on turnout. Suppose two people move into adjacent homes on the same day. One is moving from an apartment down the street, while the other is moving from a city across the country. Although they both need to register at their new addresses in order to vote, the former will easily be able to maintain her network of social and political ties while the latter's will be disrupted. Here, then, we have an instance where the degree of social disruption varies, but the need to reregister does not. If the disruption of social connections decreases turnout, then among those who have lived in their homes for similar amounts of time, turnout should be higher for those who have lived in the community longer. In this situation, any observed turnout differences cannot be attributed to the need to reregister. By analyzing the effect of community mobility among people with similar levels of residential mobility, one can test the "connectedness" hypothesis.

Most previous research has not distinguished residential and community mobility. Some studies only employ measures of residential mobility (for example, Highton, 1997; Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass, 1987; Teixeira, 1987; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980), while others only include community mobility (for example, Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995).<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this article, measuring only one type of mobility poses an insurmountable problem. It is impossible to use a single variable to distinguish the effects of the two types of mobility. An additional complication results from the strong correlation between community mobility and residential mobility. The longer that people live at one address, the longer that they live in the same community.<sup>5</sup> To obtain unbiased estimates of the effect of one, the value of the other needs to be taken into account. Otherwise the statistical results will be biased.<sup>6</sup>

Pomper and Sernekos (1991) and Timpone (1998a, 1998b) estimate turnout models that include both residential and community mobility. However, neither takes into account the joint distribution of the two variables. Instead, they include separate measures of each type of mobility. A better specification would use mobility variables that directly take into account the interrelationship between the two types of moves. I elaborate on this point later.<sup>7</sup>

Another question to consider concerns the form of relationship between mobility and turnout. Most previous studies employ a specification that entails a linearity assumption; each successive year of stability, nonmoving, is assumed to have the same effect on turnout. But that assumption may not be warranted.<sup>8</sup> Just as the relationship between age and turnout is curvilinear, so might be the relationships between mobility and turnout.<sup>9</sup>

The above discussion makes clear that there are both data and modeling

requirements that must be met in order to properly estimate the effects of residential and community mobility on turnout. In addition to collecting the usual set of demographic characteristics, how long citizens have lived in their homes *and* in their communities needs to be ascertained.<sup>10</sup> Further, because of the significant correlation between the two types of mobility, a substantial number of observations is necessary to confidently disentangle the effects.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the model used to estimate the effects of residential and community mobility should consider their interrelationship and allow for nonlinear effects of each.<sup>12</sup> No previous study meets all these criteria.

### DATA AND MODEL

Since 1976, the National Election Studies (NES) have included the following two questions:

1. How long have you lived here in city/town/township/county?
2. How long have you lived in this house/condo/apartment?

Consistent with previous studies that rely on NES data, I use the answers to these questions to measure mobility. Responses to the first question indicate community mobility (and stability), and responses to the second to indicate residential mobility (and stability). To increase the number of observations and diminish any idiosyncratic effects in particular election years, I pooled the data from the six presidential election years beginning with 1976, which resulted in a sample of 9,435 respondents over the 1976–1996 period for the multivariate analysis.

The substantial differences in distributions of community and residential mobility are revealed in Table 1. Nearly one third of respondents had moved within two years, compared to only 13 percent who changed communities in

**TABLE 1. Distribution of Residential and Community Mobility, 1976–1996**

Years in:	Current Home	Current Community
	(%)	(%)
2 or less	31	13
3–5	18	11
6–9	13	10
10 or more	38	67

*Sources:* 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996 National Election Studies.

the same time period. In contrast, whereas 38 percent of respondents had lived in their homes for ten years or more, fully two-thirds of the sample reported living in their communities for this length of time.<sup>13</sup>

Using the same categories listed in Table 1, the joint distribution of residential and community mobility has ten categories. To take into account the interrelationship between these two variables and allow for nonlinear effects in a multivariate model, I use a set of dummy variables to indicate each of the categories.<sup>14</sup>

In order to estimate the effects of residential and community mobility on turnout,<sup>15</sup> I employ a multivariate logit model that includes the mobility variables along with dummy variables for the election years and a standard set of demographic variables for the purposes of statistical control: age, education, family income, homeownership status, marital status, gender, race, and region.<sup>16</sup> The appendix describes the coding of each of these variables.

### Multivariate Analysis

Table 2 reports the logit parameter estimates of the turnout model. The variables of primary interest appear under the heading “Years in Home—Years in Community.” Each entry provides a value for the number of years respondents have lived in their current homes and is followed by a value for the number of years they have lived in their current communities. For example, 2 or less—6–9 indicates having lived in one’s home for two years or less and in one’s community for six to nine years. All ten possible combinations are listed, with the most stable group (ten or more years in one’s current home and in one’s community) serving as the excluded category for the purpose of estimation.

To interpret more easily the magnitudes of the logit estimates, Table 3 shows the estimated effects in probability.<sup>17</sup> The table reports the change in probability of voting, relative to the most stable group, associated with each of the parameter estimates for a person who would otherwise have a probability of voting equal to the overall proportion of voters in the sample. For example, the logit coefficient for living in one’s home for two years or less and in one’s community for two years or less is  $-.80$ . This translates into a .19 lower probability of voting compared with those who had lived in their homes and communities for ten or more years.<sup>18</sup>

Consider first the effects of residential mobility, which are evident by reading across the rows of Table 3. Among those who have lived in the same community for ten or more years, there are estimates for each of the four levels of residential stability. Living two years or less in one’s home lowers turnout by .14. The turnout decline of having been in one’s home for 3–5 years is .09. Thus, the estimated effect of being at one’s residence two years or less compared to 3–5 years, is  $-.05$ , or five percentage points [ $-.14 - (-.09) = -.05$ ]. Similar

**TABLE 2. Parameter Estimates of Turnout**

Variable	Logit Estimate	Standard Error
Years in Home—Years in Community		
2 or less—2 or less	-.80**	.10
2 or less—3-5	-.76**	.14
3-5—3-5	-.59**	.11
2 or less—6-9	-.57**	.17
3-5—6-9	-.43**	.19
6-9—6-9	-.26**	.13
2 or less—10 or more	-.61**	.09
3-5—10 or more	-.40**	.10
6-9—10 or more	-.36**	.11
10 or more—10 or more	—	—
Age	.07**	.01
Age <sup>2</sup> /100	-.04**	.01
Education	.69**	.03
Family Income	.22**	.03
Rent/own	-.19**	.06
Single/married	-.28**	.06
Female/male	-.01	.05
Nonwhite/white	.08	.08
South/nonsouth	-.31**	.06
Election Year		
1976	—	—
1980	-.04	.09
1984	.03	.09
1988	-.31**	.09
1992	.13	.09
1996	-.22**	.09
Constant	-3.10**	.24
Number of observations: 9,435		
Initial log likelihood: -5,538.9		
Final log likelihood: -4,597.1		
Percent correctly predicted: 76		

\*p &lt; .10.

\*\*p &lt; .05.

*Sources:* 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996 National Election Studies.*Note:* See appendix for coding of variables.

calculations may be made to compare the 3-5 year category to the 6-9 year category and the 6-9 year category to the 10 years or more category. For those who have lived in their community for six to nine years, there are two additional category-to-category comparisons. For the value of 3-5 years in the community, there is one more. Among those living in the community for two years or less,

**TABLE 3. Estimated Effects of Residential and Community Mobility on Turnout (in probability)**

	Years in Current Home			
	2 or less	3-5	6-9	10 or more
Years in Current Community				
2 or less	-.19			
3-5	-.17	-.13		
6-9	-.13	-.10	-.06	
10 or more	-.14	-.09	-.08	0

*Notes:* Cell entries report the change in probability of voting, relative to the most stable group, associated with each of the logit estimates (from Table 2) for a person who otherwise would have a probability of voting equal to the overall proportion of voters in the sample. For example, the logit coefficient for living at one's current residence for two years or less and in one's community for two years or less is  $-.80$ . This translates into a diminished probability of voting of  $.19$ .

*Source:* Logit estimates reported in Table 2.

there are no comparisons because there is no variation in residential mobility; all respondents in this group have lived in their homes for two years or less. Overall, then, there are six category-to-category comparisons regarding the effect of residential mobility on turnout. Their magnitudes range from  $-.08$  to  $-.01$ , with an average of  $-.042$ . In other words, the average effect of residential mobility is 4.2 percentage points.

Turning to the effects of community mobility, there are also six category-to-category comparisons. These comparisons are made by reading down the columns of Table 3 (i.e., within categories of residential mobility). Notice that two of the comparisons produce effects in the direction opposite to that predicted by the rootedness hypothesis. Among those who have lived in their homes for two years or less, the estimated effect of living in one's current community for six to nine years is  $-.13$ . For those living in the community for ten or more years, one would expect the size of the effect to be smaller, but it is faintly larger,  $-.14$ . Similarly, among those who have lived in their home for six to nine years, the magnitude of the turnout effect of living in one's current community for ten or more years,  $-.08$ , is larger than the effect of living in the community for 6-9 years,  $-.06$ . Overall, the six comparisons range from  $-.04$  to  $.02$ , with an average of  $-.012$ , or 1.2 percentage points. Put more simply, the average effect of community mobility is 1.2 percentage points.

What emerges from the analysis, then, is the finding that there are substantial turnout effects of changing residences, and once this factor is taken into account, there is relatively little difference whether one moves within or outside the community. In percentage terms, the average effect of residential mobility is more than three times that of community mobility.

Another way to compare the effects of the two types of moves is to consider the estimated differences between the most and least mobile. With regard to residential mobility, this means focusing on those who have lived in their communities for ten years or more and comparing those who have lived in their homes for two years or less to those living in their homes for ten or more years. In this group, the estimated turnout rate is 14 percentage points lower among those who have lived in their homes for the least amount of time. Comparing those living in their communities for the longest and shortest periods of time, there is a substantially smaller estimated effect. Among those living in their homes for two years or less, turnout is five percentage points lower for those who have lived in their communities for two years or less compared with those who have been in the same community for ten or more years [ $-.19 - (-.14) = -.05$ ].

The comparatively small estimated effects of community stability raise the question of whether they are real or merely the result of sampling variability. To investigate this possibility I compared the statistical fit, measured by the log-likelihood, of a restricted model that included all the control variables and residential mobility against one that included all the control variables, residential mobility, and community mobility. If the estimated community mobility effects are real, then the improvement in fit with the second model should be sufficiently large to make the null hypothesis of no community mobility effects unlikely. Such an improvement is evident ( $p = .06$ ),<sup>19</sup> suggesting that the proper conclusion is that there are small effects of changing communities and considerably larger effects of changing homes on voter turnout.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In their recent analysis of political participation in the United States, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) clearly articulate the two primary hypotheses for the negative effect of mobility on turnout. They argue that “[p]eople who live in one place for many years have more opportunity to develop broader networks of friends and associates” (p. 157). They also note that people who move “must reestablish themselves politically, most importantly by reregistering to vote” (p. 157). The purpose of this article has been to estimate the size of these two separate hypothesized effects. To do this, I relied on the observation that whereas all moves impose the cost of registration on movers, only some moves entail the disruption of social ties. Shorter moves, those within one’s current community, permit the preservation of social connections. Longer moves, in contrast, are more disruptive: an intercounty move “customarily places the migrant in a completely different community, making easy personal contact with friends and family from the old community difficult. It forces the migrant to form new relationships, and often coincides with changes in jobs and schools” (Brown, 1988, p. 19).

By using separate measures of residential mobility and community mobility, I was able to test the “need to register” and “social disruption” hypotheses. The results suggest that the relationship between moving and turnout largely reflects the need to reregister. Among people who have lived in their communities for similar amounts of time, there are substantial turnout effects associated with a change of address. Because the level of social connections has been held constant, the observed relationship between residential mobility and turnout may be interpreted as reflecting the effects of the need to reregister.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, among people who have lived in their homes for similar amounts of time, there are only modest effects of community mobility,<sup>21</sup> indicating that the alleged disruption of social connections lowers turnout by only a small amount.<sup>22</sup> With regard to turnout, the costs of moving, then, appear to be largely the result of the need to register. The social costs are less important.

Although community stability does not appear to increase turnout very much, the general hypothesis that social connectedness and community integration are important has not been disproven. In fact, the results reported in this article, like those in previous analyses, substantiate the hypothesis. Two variables that tap connectedness, renting (as opposed to owning) and being single, are both associated with lower probabilities of turnout.<sup>23</sup>

To conclude, although in many ways it is “obvious that a move across the country should be more significant than a move down the block” (Brown, 1988, p. 19), this does not appear to be the case with regard to voter turnout. Moving from one home to another, irrespective of the distance, lowers turnout substantially. Longer distances, and presumably greater social disruption, only depress turnout a bit more.

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## APPENDIX VARIABLE CODING

The measurement and coding of the mobility variables are fully described in the text. The coding of the other variables was as follows.

*Age:* age in years. To capture the curvilinear relationship between age and turnout, both age and  $(age^2)/100$  are included in the multivariate model. The latter is divided by 100 to simplify the reporting of the results.

*Education:* (1) elementary school; (2) some high school; (3) high school graduate; (4) some college; (5) college graduate.

*Family income:* (1) 0–16 percentile; (2) 17–33 percentile; (3) 34–67 percentile; (4) 68–95 percentile; (5) 96–100 percentile.

*Rent/own:* (0) own; (1) rent.

*Single/married:* (0) other; (1) married and living with spouse.

*Female/male:* (0) male; (1) female.

*Nonwhite/white:* (0) white; (1) nonwhite.

*South/nonsouth:* (0) other (1) resides in one of the eleven former Confederate states.

*Election year:* a set of dummy variables indicating the year of interview.

## NOTES

1. One of the first investigations of the relationship between mobility and turnout in America is Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980). The relationship between mobility and turnout in other countries has received substantially less attention. In one study, Briens (1997) finds barely noticeable effects of mobility on turnout in Canada.
2. The two explanations are not mutually exclusive. Turnout among movers might be lower because of their need to reregister *and* their disrupted community ties, a possibility I investigate.
3. The distinction between residential mobility and community mobility has been noted elsewhere. For example, Wolfinger and Highton (1994, pp. 34–35) report that over half of the people who changed residences over a five-year period in California remained within the same county. Table 1 will further demonstrate that many more people change residences than change communities. Brown (1988) also distinguishes between moving in general and migration, which he defines as moving outside one's current county of residence.
4. Teixeira (1992) combines the two measures in his analysis. He is primarily interested in residential mobility, but in two years that he analyzes, 1968 and 1972, his data source, the National Elections Studies, did not include a measure of residential mobility. To compensate, he substituted community mobility for residential mobility in those years (pp. 211–212).
5. Using the data described below, the correlation between the number of years lived at one's current address and number of years lived in one's current community is .59.
6. In addition, moving (be it changing residences or communities) is associated with other characteristics that affect turnout, like youth and renting one's place of residence. Consequently, a multivariate approach to estimating the effects of mobility is necessary.
7. As will become apparent, modeling the joint effects is rather cumbersome and depends on the availability of substantially more observations than the number provided by a typical National Election Study. Given that their primary concerns lay elsewhere, these facts probably explain why Pomper and Sernekos (1991) and Timpone (1998a, 1998b) did not venture down the path I follow in this article.
8. Moreover, given that it can be tested, the assumption need not be made.
9. Using a nonlinear model, like logit or probit, is not sufficient. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980), and most subsequent studies, demonstrate the need to specify a nonlinear functional form for the effect of age even when employing logit and probit turnout models.
10. Sigelman et al. (1985) used variables that measured the length of time respondents had lived

in the county and state. From the perspective adopted here, these are both indicators of community integration. Because there is no variable that indicates residential mobility, one cannot be certain if the mobility effects they uncover are due to disrupted community ties or the need to reregister.

11. Unfortunately, the Current Population Survey Voter Supplement, the usual data source to which political scientists turn when a large number of observations are required for a turnout analysis, does not include a measure of community mobility.
12. By increasing the number of mobility variables in the model, the nonlinear specification of effects will increase the level of collinearity, further increasing the need for a substantial number of observations to confidently sort out the effects.
13. Mobility rates do not appear to have changed much over time. The correlations between election year and residential stability and election year and community stability are .03 and .02, respectively.
14. The joint distribution of residential and community mobility has ten categories and not sixteen ( $4 * 4 = 16$ ) because it is impossible to have lived at one's current residence longer than in one's current community. The 0.4 percent of the sample with values of residential stability that exceed their values of community stability were deleted from the analysis.
15. Like Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass (1987, p. 51) I find that substituting registration for turnout as the dependent variable in the analysis produces a similar pattern of results. Timpone (1998a) argues that the two-step process of registration and turnout should be modeled explicitly. However, given my concern with ascertaining the overall effects of mobility on turnout and Timpone's finding of a statistically insignificant relationship between the registration and turnout stages in his analyses, estimating a single turnout equation seems adequate.
16. Dummy variables indicating each election year were included to take into account the changing levels of aggregate turnout from election to election; excluding these election year indicators has virtually no effect on the magnitudes of the mobility estimates. Other contextual variables like registration laws, election closeness, and the presence of concurrent Senate and gubernatorial elections are not included in the model because there is no reason to expect that they would be correlated with either of the mobility variables or any of the other included independent variables. For example, states with shorter registration closing dates do not have higher (or lower) levels of mobility. Thus the exclusion does not result in biased estimates.
17. Several methods are available for doing this, all of which reveal the same pattern of results.
18. The log odds of .72, the overall proportion of voters in the sample, equals .94. The logit coefficient (predicted change in log odds) for living in one's home for two years or less and in one's community for two years or less is  $-.80$ . The resultant log odds is  $.14$  ( $.94 - .80 = .14$ ), which translates into a probability of .53. Thus being in the most mobile category decreases turnout (relative to the excluded category of the most stable) by  $.19$  ( $.53 - .72 = -.19$ ).
19. A similar test of the incremental improvement in the likelihood of the data under the model that includes both residential and community mobility to one that only includes community mobility strongly disconfirms the possibility that there are no effects of residential mobility ( $p < .001$ ).
20. This contention receives additional support from the results of reestimating the turnout model and including a battery of attitudinal variables that are plausibly related to social connection (strength of party identification, political efficacy, campaign interest, and caring about election outcomes). If the effects of mobility are mediated by social connections, then the inclusion of the attitudinal variables should substantially decrease the magnitudes of the mobility effects. This is not the case. Including the aforementioned attitudinal variables slightly increases the magnitudes of the mobility effects; the logit estimates increase by an average of .04.
21. The significant effect of community mobility that Rosenstone and Hansen report (1993, p.

- 158) thus appears to be a methodological artifact resulting from the exclusion of residential mobility in their model.
22. To be sure, there may be some social disruption associated with intracommunity moves, but given the small effects of those moves, it is hard to make the case that these would be substantial.
  23. Using the procedure described in the text, the logit estimates reported in Table 2 suggest that renting and being single lower turnout by 4.5 and 6.5 percentage points, respectively.

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