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*Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1. (Mar., 1997), pp. 215-227.

Stable URL:

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*Political Research Quarterly* is currently published by University of Utah.

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# Residential Mobility, Voter Registration, and Electoral Participation in Canada

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This paper tests two propositions advanced to explain reduced voter turnout among the residentially mobile: (1) when citizens have a personal responsibility to re-register following a move, this poses a participation barrier and reduces turnout; (2) the act of moving severs the social networks that normally provide citizens with the information and support to make political choices, thereby reducing turnout. These alternative explanations are evaluated using Canadian national election data. The analysis reinforces previous research asserting the importance of registration barriers in reducing the turnout of those who have recently moved. Additionally, I find that movers' social ties play an independent role in their turnout, with moving particularly attenuating unmarried citizens' turnout. These findings are extended to suggest that recent U.S. initiatives facilitating voter registration may produce less than previously predicted turnout gains among the mobile.

This article expands the consideration of the relationship between residential mobility and reduced political participation, with voter registration regarded as but one of several factors that may individually or cumulatively reduce movers' turnout. Most current mobility and voter turnout research

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NOTE: This is a substantially revised version of a paper I presented at the 1995 meetings of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago. This article benefited immeasurably from constructive criticism offered by Carole Uhlaner, Marty Wattenberg, and Ruth Jones. Additionally, Richard Johnson offered me an exceptionally useful insider's view of the Canadian National Election Study. Data from the 1979 Canadian National Election Study were made available by ICPSR (#8079). The data were originally collected by Harold Clarke, Jane Jenson, Lawrence Leduc, and Jon Pammett. Neither ICPSR nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretation presented here.

*Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (March 1997), pp. 215–227

focuses on the U.S. and almost solely considers the nexus between turnout and institutional (i.e., voter registration) provisions, giving little attention to the effects moving has on one's social ties (e.g., Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987). Accurately specifying the relationship between residential mobility and voter turnout has theoretical implications as well as public policy ramifications, given that advocates of the institutional explanation frequently propose plans intended to remedy the supposed ills of U.S. states' voter registration systems (e.g., Wolfinger and Highton 1994; Piven and Cloward 1989).

I propose two alternative explanations linking residential mobility with decreased voter turnout: (1) voter registration costs reduce movers' turnout, and (2) broken social ties depress turnout among the mobile.<sup>1</sup> These alternatives are then tested in a country (Canada) where individually borne voter registration costs are quite low. This setting particularly facilitates a test of the social effects of moving on turnout, absent elevated personal voter registration responsibilities.

The institutional provisions requiring re-registration following a move may pose a threshold barrier to migrant citizens' voting. In the existing literature this explanation emphasizes American citizens' responsibility to re-register following any move, as a prerequisite to voting (Kelly, Ayres, and Bowen 1967; Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978; Powell 1982). Only one other modern democracy—Jamaica—requires as much citizen initiative to register to vote as does the U.S. (Powell 1982: 114). Registration requirements are considered a significant factor attenuating the United States' voter turnout, which one would otherwise expect to be quite high given citizens' attitudes and demographic characteristics (Powell 1986; Glass, Squire, and Wolfinger 1984; Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978). Although several studies empirically relate mobility to depressed turnout (Verba and Nie 1972: 139; Glass et al. 1984: 53, 55; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980: 50-54), a single article dominates

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<sup>1</sup> As used here, residential mobility, movers and mobility all refer to people who changed their residences at some time in the past. In this paper "movers," "migrants" and "those who move" are used synonymously, as are the terms "residential mobility" and "mobility." Although migration and mobility are treated here as equivalent, for some geographers the words' meanings depend on length of residency or the distance moved. For example, in Shaw (1985) "movers" denote anyone moving within the last five years, while "migrants" are those who cross a municipal boundary in their move. Likewise, Cadwallader (1992) distinguishes migration from residential mobility, while Brown (1988: 19) classifies migrants as anyone crossing a county boundary. This article only considers the political involvement level of migrants moving within national borders, not those immigrants or emigrants moving across national borders. Studying immigration would necessitate a consideration of complex citizenship requirements and their substantial influence on political participation (Brown 1988).

current institutional explanations of mobility's dampening effects on U.S. turnout. In 1987 Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass reported that U.S. citizens who had moved within the last two years voted 17 percent less than did those who had not moved in over two years, Squire et al. concluded "that mobility has a substantial and statistically significant impact on turnout" due to registration requirements (1987: 52). Additionally, they found that once citizens overcome the threshold of registration they are likely to vote, regardless of their mobility. However, this assertion fails the strongest empirical test to which Squire et al. subject it, suggesting caution in accepting these findings absent further analysis.<sup>2</sup> This tentative conclusion suggests that there is room to explore other factors that may influence movers' turnout.

The act of relocating disrupts one's social networks of political information and support, thereby reducing movers' interest and motivation to vote—and ultimately their turnout. The political participation literature has long recognized the relationship between turnout rates and the strength of citizens' social information and support networks. As early as 1944, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (27: 138) ascribe a major role to social associations in determining voting choices. In passing, Verba and Nie (1972: 145) note that new residents "may not have developed the affiliational and interpersonal resources for participation." Simple interaction with others on political matters increases both information and support (Lipset 1981: 209, 217), and newcomers have fewer opportunities for interaction than do more stable citizens. Wolfinger and Rosenstone explain that "the costs of acquiring voting information in a new, unfamiliar community are high" (1980: 54).<sup>3</sup> Higher information costs reduce the likelihood that the voter will obtain necessary political information and cast a ballot (Downs 1957). Married couples who are mobile, though, do not lose as much of their social "support and motivational system" and vote at higher rates after moving than do single citizens (Squire et al. 1987: 53; see also Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980: 44-46). Recently,

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<sup>2</sup> Comparing the turnout rates of residents in the four U.S. states not requiring pre-registration with other states having this requirement, Squire et al. find that "mobility deters voting almost as much in states where registration is not so great a barrier" (1987: 56). Subsequent authors often ignore the article's troubling empirical results, still laying the blame for the mobile's reduced turnout squarely at the feet of registration requirements (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). On the other hand, the occasional researcher notes that re-registration costs imposed when citizens move may not explain those movers' reduced turnout as completely as the institutional literature would suggest (e.g., Teixeira 1992: 119).

<sup>3</sup> Although not exclusively a social effect, the physical acts of moving and resettling are time consuming and disrupt movers' lives. Although not examined here, these activities may produce additional obstacles to establishing new social networks and delay the eventual formation of new networks that provide information and support voting.

Rosenstone and Hansen (1993: 157-58) associate longer residency with stronger social networks and increased voting; however, they caution that in America much of this relationship may be accounted for by voter registration laws. Of course, citizens may also derive their political information from sources less affected by her or his immediate social context. For example, to the extent that a citizen focuses on national politics, utilizes national party cues, or considers the national political environment most salient, the voter's information channels should be less disrupted by an intra-country move (Brown 1988: 9).<sup>4</sup>

For all these references in diverse works over a considerable length of time, there is a dearth of empirical research evaluating the *independent* social impact of moving on turnout. Each of these studies ultimately explains movers' reduced turnout in institutional terms. This may be largely attributed to these researchers' dependence on U.S. data; within the U.S. it is inherently difficult to distinguish institutional effects from social ones.<sup>5</sup>

### HYPOTHESES

Three testable hypotheses emerge from this brief literature review: (1) if in the (near) absence of individual voter registration duty more mobile citizens vote at lower rates than do the less mobile, then non-institutional processes are affecting turnout; (2) if married citizens' participation is dampened less following a move, then the social explanation gains support; (3) if the turnout of those most interested in national politics—vis-à-vis regional or local politics—is attenuated less by moving, the social explanation gains support. Although I characterize these as alternative hypotheses, these processes affecting the mobile's turnout are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

### METHODOLOGY AND DATA

These three hypotheses will be evaluated in a country with very low individual registration costs—Canada. In contrast to the previous U.S. studies, this analysis particularly attempts to isolate the non-institutional voting impediments presented by residential mobility by using Canadian data.

Methodologically, the U.S. has been a favored setting in which to study both residential mobility and voter turnout, because there is so much variance in both of these phenomena. On the other hand, the U.S. is a less than

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<sup>4</sup> While partisanship provides some formal cues, it has notable shortcomings. Movers entering a community that does not support their prior partisan orientation may waver or change party affiliation (Brown 1988). Additionally, partisanship is weakening, thereby eroding its importance as a cue—at least in the U.S. case (Wattenberg 1996).

<sup>5</sup> The forbidding task of decomposing registration law effects from other effects within U.S. borders is briefly discussed in the Methodology and Data section.

ideal locus of study if one wishes to evaluate the independent impact of registration laws on voting after moving. There is no simple way randomly to assign some movers traditionally high U.S. re-registration costs and to exempt others from these costs in order to isolate the institutional costs of moving from other possible factors (e.g., broken social ties).<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately, the U.S. is not the only country having the appropriate qualities facilitating a study of the relationship between residential mobility and turnout. Canada shares a number of the characteristics making the U.S. an attractive locus for mobility and voter turnout research, but it also has automatic, (nearly) universal voter registration making it a particularly attractive setting in which to test this article's three hypotheses. First, Canada's residential mobility is higher than that of most democracies—other than the U.S.—and Canadians vote at a higher rate than their Southern neighbors, but fall below Western European voting levels.<sup>7</sup> From 1976 through 1981, for example, about 46 percent of Canadians changed residences (Ledent 1990: 50), while about 40 percent of Americans moved in 1980–85 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1987). Turning out at about 65 and 75 percent in its 1970s national elections, Canada's voting rate falls between most industrialized democracies (often over 85 percent of eligible citizens) and the typical U.S. presidential turnout of 55 percent during these years (Powell 1986: 38, Elections Canada 1985, Crocker 1994: 33).

Second, in Canada movers and stayers incur nearly identical registration costs, offering a naturally occurring control for institutional registration requirements. As is the country's typical practice, just before the 1979 federal election (for example) the Canadian government either enumerated residents, registering them in their homes, or, primarily in rural areas, did not require that they register before voting (Robinson 1985).<sup>8</sup> These provisions remove virtually all registration costs for Canadians.

Third, individual data are necessary to impute properly individual-level conclusions from citizens' actions. In the Canadian case there are high quality survey data available from each recent national election, although only the 1979 study documented citizens' residential mobility.<sup>9</sup> This cross-section's

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<sup>6</sup> Squire et al. (1987) attempted something like this by comparing turnout in the four U.S. states not requiring voter registration with turnout in the other states (see note 2).

<sup>7</sup> In addition to lacking variance to explain, proposing voter registration reforms in democracies regularly topping 90 percent turnout (e.g., Austria, Netherlands, Italy) is not unlike "Givin' water to a drowning man"—to borrow an apt locution (Parnell 1995).

<sup>8</sup> In more recent elections, British Columbia has instituted a permanent voter registration list (Drummond 1982: 193).

<sup>9</sup> Specifically, the Canadian National Election Study—1984 (ICPSR 8544), the Canadian National Election Study—1988 (ICPSR 9386), and the Canadian Election Study—1993

interviews were conducted immediately following the 1979 national parliamentary election. Although Canadian national politics has seen several changes in leadership since the late 1970s, turnout and mobility remain relatively stable. From the 1970s through the close of the 1980s annual residential mobility rates varied by only a few percentage points (Ledent 1990: 52). Similarly, aggregate voter turnout maintained a fairly steady 75 percent for three of the last five elections, dipping to 69 and 70 percent in 1980 and 1993 elections, respectively (Feigert 1989: 59; Chief Electoral Officer 1993).

### DATA ANALYSIS

I will address this article's most basic question first: while we know that the mobile vote far less in the U.S., how do they fare in Canada where they incur negligible registration costs? Table 1 provides a comparison of voting and residential mobility, showing only a modest (non-significant) relationship. The least mobile only turnout three percentage points more than do recent movers.<sup>10</sup> Thus, absent registration costs, movers experience little reduced turnout. While this finding preliminarily supports the institutional costs hypothesis, these findings remain tentative. More definitive conclusions await a multivariate analysis, controlling for intervening variables that may influence this relationship.

≡ TABLE 1  
PERCENT VOTING BY RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY

	Years Living in Current Neighborhood			
	0-2	3 - 5	6-10	>10
Percent Voting	87	89	88	90
(cases)	(251)	(189)	(203)	(612)

Source: 1979 Canadian National Election Study

Note: The number of valid cases used in calculating this table equals 1409; the numbers in parentheses are cell frequencies.

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(ICPSR 6571) lack mobility data for the respondents. In the two more recent studies, the investigators were unable to include the question due to interview length restrictions (Johnston 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Although the total 1979 Canadian turnout was about 75 percent of the voting age population, the 1979 Study's voting level for the entire sample was 87 percent (Elections Canada 1985). While the 12 percent overreport is not terribly reassuring, it does not rob the data of its usefulness. In survey research a 10 to 12 percent overreport of turnout is not unusual when respondents are asked to recall their vote (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960: 94-95). Since the 1979 survey was not vote-validated, it is not possible to exclude the overreporters from the analysis or be completely confident that they did not systematically misreport with respect to mobility or education or some other important variable.

Turning our attention to specific groups within the electorate, if marital status affects turnout even when registration costs are minimal, then one is likely to find a social benefit (for voting) from marriage. Initially, Table 2 appears to support such a claim. For the first two years after moving, those who are married turn out about 9 percentage points more than the unmarried. The unmarried, though, never vote at a rate equal to the married, even after residing at the same address for ten years. Thus, Table 2 does not initially support previous research suggesting that marriage mitigates some of the *short-term* costs of mobility. The data do, however, demonstrate an independent “marital effect” that apparently increases turnout regardless of mobility or registration costs.

≡ TABLE 2  
PERCENT VOTING BY MARITAL STATUS AND RELEVANT LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT  
DEPENDING ON LENGTH OF RESIDENCE

	Years Living in Current Neighborhood			
	0-2	3-5	6-10	>10
Married	91 <sup>a</sup> (172)	91 (142)	91 (155)	94 <sup>b</sup> (398)
Not Married	82 (116)	86 (70)	82 (77)	86 (279)
National	91 <sup>c</sup> (167)	95 <sup>d</sup> (122)	90 (135)	92 (361)
Provincial	85 (81)	79 (65)	85 (73)	88 (223)

Source: 1979 Canadian National Election Study

Note: The number of cases in this table equals 1408; the numbers in parentheses are cell frequencies; only the columns having significant  $\chi^2$  are noted.

<sup>a</sup> the two cells in this column have a  $\chi^2$  of 5.7 and  $p < .05$

<sup>b</sup> the two cells in this column have a  $\chi^2$  of 13.0 and  $p < .001$

<sup>c</sup> The two cells in this column have a  $\chi^2$  of 5.2 and  $p < .10$

<sup>d</sup> the two cells in this column have a  $\chi^2$  of 10.5 and  $p < .01$  two-tailed test

The third hypothesis anticipates that moving should have a smaller impact on those who are more focused at the national level, because moving should less disrupt their sources of national political information (e.g., TV, magazines, etc.) and partisanship.<sup>11</sup> In Table 2, those seeing the national level

<sup>11</sup> Of course, respondents noting that they see the national level as more relevant would be expected to report generally higher turnout in *national* elections than those focusing on the provincial level of government. On the other hand, if citizens who report that the provincial (or nonnational) level of government is most relevant to them vote nationally at increasing rates with increasing length of residency, though, the social hypotheses are bolstered.

of government as most relevant vote at similar rates, with about 90 to 95 percent voting, regardless of mobility. On the other hand, citizens who view provincial government as most relevant vote significantly less, until their length of residency reaches six or more years. Those focusing on provincial politics who live in the same neighborhood for fewer than six years demonstrate significantly ( $p < .10$  or less) lower turnout. This rather indirect measure of voters' information sources supports the social explanation of reduced turnout among the mobile.

While the preceding tables conditionally support both the institutional hypothesis and the "national focus" social hypothesis, these treatments have been weakened by a lack of statistically significant findings or the limitations of simple cross-tabular analysis. Deficiencies of this type are most directly addressed using multivariate statistical techniques. Thus, I now move to logistic regressions utilizing most of the relevant variables considered previously.

Table 3 presents models involving varying combinations of the independent variables of interest regressed on voting in the 1979 Canadian National Election. Model 1 in Table 3 includes *age*, *marital status*, and *education* independent variables, while model 2 includes *length of residence*, in addition to all of model 1's variables. Although *length of residence* does not gain significance, the equation in model 2 demonstrates a moderate reduction in -2 Log Likelihood (-2LL), versus model 1.<sup>12</sup> Thus, even in the absence of individual voter registration responsibility, residential stability statistically increases one's probability of voting.

In Table 3, models 3 through 7 test the two social hypotheses. Examining the third hypothesis, *length of residence*, achieves significance in model 3 with the addition of *national political focus*, and *national party ID* variables. *National focus* has a positive, very significant relationship to voter turnout in model 3, meaning that those with a national political orientation are more likely to vote vis-à-vis those with provincial orientations, when controlling for mobility. The comparison of models 2 and 3 also indicates that the informational and social variables draw explanatory power away from the demographic age-related variables.

Considering the second hypothesis, the effects of the independent variables are examined separately for those who are married and those who are not in models 4 and 5. Both groups in Table 3 share strikingly similar coefficients and significance levels with two exceptions. Having a national political

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<sup>12</sup> In logistic regression, the -2 Log Likelihood (-2LL) value may be used to determine whether additional variables contribute increasing explanatory value. If the -2LL decreases with the inclusion of another variable, then that factor explains some additional variance, improving the model's fit (Norusis 1993).

≡ TABLE 3  
LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY AND OTHER FACTORS ON VOTING IN  
CANADA<sup>a</sup>

	1	2	3	Models 4 <sup>b</sup>	5 <sup>c</sup>	6 <sup>d</sup>	7 <sup>e</sup>
Length of Residence		.010 (.008)	.0181 (.009)	.019 (.013)	.016 (.013)		
Age in Years	.037*** (.008)	.035*** (.008)	.019* (.009)	.013 (.013)	.024 (.014)	.038* (.018)	.036*** (.009)
70 Years or or over (dummy)	-1.543*** (.446)	-1.574*** (.448)	-1.186* (.507)	-.575 (.768)	-1.657** (.649)	4.252 (13.790)	-1.674*** (.479)
Married (dummy)	.522** (.196)	.552** (.196)	.589** (.232)			.851* (.382)	.434 (.231)
Years of Education	.142*** (.032)	.146*** (.032)	.117** (.038)	.125* (.060)	.115* (.049)	.229** (.074)	.122*** (.036)
National Focus (dummy)			.515** (.213)	.847** (.301)	.145 (.312)		
National Party ID			.162 (.153)	.157 (.214)	.213 (.225)		
Constant	-1.052* (.518)	-1.154* (.522)	-.876 (.701)	-.974 (1.030)	-.314 (1.018)	-2.460* (1.149)	-.680 (.583)
-2 Log Likelihood	895	893	648	313	332	197	692
Number of cases	1350	1350	1069	399	670	258	1092

Source: The 1979 Canadian National Election Study

Note: Figures are weighted, unstandardized logistic regression coefficients-, standard errors are in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup> Variables defined in the Appendix.

<sup>b</sup> Unmarried cases only

<sup>c</sup> Married cases only

<sup>d</sup> Respondents with 2 or fewer years of residence only

<sup>e</sup> Respondents with 3 or more years of residence only

p < .05    p < .01    p < .001    two-tailed test

orientation in politics is very significantly related to turnout among the unmarried, while being over 70 years of age is significantly associated with lower turnout among the married. Thus, absent one's closest social attachment (a spouse), citizens' voting in national elections depends more on whether one concentrates on national politics. Models 6 and 7 further distinguish and highlight the key role of social ties in recent movers' turnout. Even absent individual registration costs, marriage is more significantly associated with the turnout of those who moved within the last two years (model 6) than it is among the citizens having three or more years of tenure (model 7). The strength of this association is all the more impressive when one considers the fact that model 6 has fewer than 300 cases while model 7 has nearly 1100 cases.

### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This article outlines two theoretical approaches that may explain reduced voter turnout among the more mobile: institutional re-registration requirements and broken social ties. In turn, these two theoretical orientations suggest three testable hypotheses: (1) if in the (near) absence of individual voter registration duty more mobile citizens vote at lower rates than do the less mobile, then non-institutional processes are affecting turnout; (2) if married citizens' participation is dampened less following a move, then the social explanation gains support; (3) if the turnout of those most interested in national politics—*vis-à-vis* regional or local politics—is attenuated less by moving, the social explanation gains support.

These hypotheses were studied using Canadian survey data. A series of empirical tests performed within this article lends credence to all three hypotheses, with logistic regression providing the most concrete evidence. The fact that the mobile vote almost as heavily as do stayers in Canada initially favors the institutional registration law explanation. Still, the social hypotheses are also supported by the finding that marriage boosts the turnout of newly relocated citizens, while interest in national (versus provincial) politics also offsets the impact of a recent move or being unmarried. In light of the evidence presented here, we should be circumspect in attributing too much responsibility to voter registration laws alone in accounting for differential turnout among the mobile.

Although this article does not contain a rigorous cross-national comparison of mobility's effects on turnout, its findings in the Canadian case suggest broader public policy implications for the U. S, where voter registration laws are currently receiving considerable attention. This article's new empirical finding that *both* social and institutional factors depress turnout among recent movers offers a mixed bag of policy implications for observers of U.S. politics. On the one hand, this research legitimately supports an easing of the individual voter registration burdens facing a highly mobile U.S. population. On the other hand, moving's social costs clearly attenuate turnout even in the absence of individual registration responsibility. This more constrained view of voter registration, casting these laws as one of several factors affecting movers' turnout, offers a plausible explanation for previous researchers' difficulty in specifying statistically significant mobility models (i.e., Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987). In conclusion, no one should expect any voter registration plan to alleviate fully the "mobility turnout penalty," particularly among the unmarried and those not concentrating their attention on politics at the national level.

### APPENDIX

#### Variable Construction

*Turnout*: The dependent dummy variable, coded 0 = did not vote, 1 = voted.

*Length of Residence:* Coded as the number of years one lived in his or her current neighborhood.

*Age in years:* This continuous variable is self-explanatory.

*70 years and over:* A dummy variable coded as 0 = under 70 years of age, 1 = 70 or above.

*Married:* A dummy variable coded 0 = not married, 1 = married.

*Years of education:* A summary education variable provided by the survey.

*National focus:* A dummy variable coded as 0 = provincial or other, and 1 = national political focus.

*National Party ID:* Coded 0 = independent, 1 = weak, 2 = moderate, and 3 = very strong support for a national political party.

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Received: June 24, 1996

Accepted for Publication: September 20, 1996

## LINKED CITATIONS

- Page 1 of 2 -



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*Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1. (Mar., 1997), pp. 215-227.

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### **[Footnotes]**

#### <sup>6</sup> **Residential Mobility and Voter Turnout**

Peeverill Squire; Raymond E. Wolfinger; David P. Glass

*The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1. (Mar., 1987), pp. 45-66.

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### **Residential Mobility and Voter Turnout**

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