

The Disenfranchisement/Enfranchisement Voter Participation Rate Hypothesis: Preliminary Analysis

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Abstract: Voter participation rates vary widely across the 50 states of the U.S.A. This study seeks to provide insights into the determinants of this variation. Using the 2004 and 2008 general elections as the initial focus, it is found that the voter participation rate in a state is positively related to the percentage of the state's adult population with at least a high school education, the state's unemployment rate, the percentage of the state's population age 65 and older, and the female labor force participation rate in the state, while being negatively related to the state's median family income. The voter participation rate is also found to be a decreasing function of the percentage of its population that is Hispanic. However, although the voter participation rate is lower in states with a higher percentage of Afro-American population for the 2004 general election, for the 2008 general election it is found that states with a higher percentage of Afro-Americans had a higher voter participation rate. The latter two findings are consistent with the following two-part disenfranchisement/enfranchisement hypothesis: *minorities* who feel politically *disenfranchised* have lower expected benefits from voting and have a lower voter participation rate, whereas, by contrast, minorities who feel potentially *enfranchised* or empowered by a candidate sharing their own minority status, have higher expected benefits from voting and hence are more inclined to go to the polls. This hypothesis receives further support from the results for the 2000 and 2012 general elections.

Keywords: expected benefits from voting; voter disenfranchisement; voter participation rate; geographic voter turnout differentials

JEL Classification: D72; J15

1. Introduction

Since the introduction of the “rational voter model,” there have been numerous theoretical extensions and empirical studies seeking to expand and to empirically test the theory or derivatives thereof in a variety of “real world” and “experimental” contexts (e.g., Buchanan, 1968; Kafoglis and Cebula, 1981; Cox and Munger, 1989; Morton, 1991; Aldrich, 1993; Green and Shapiro, 1994; Greene and Nikolaev, 1999; Knack, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Copeland and Laband, 2002; Barreto et al., 2004; Feddersen, 2004; Cebula and Toma, 2006; Herrera, Levine and Martinelli, 2008; Krasa and Polborn, 2009; Grober and Schram, 2010; Degen and Merlo, 2011).

The complexity of voting behavior and the voting process are especially well demonstrated in the classic work by Buchanan and Tullock (1962). Moreover, the concept of voting in alternative ways, such as ‘voting with one’s feet,’ is exemplified in the work of Tiebout (1956) among others. More recently, Copeland and Laband (2002), as well as Barreto, Segura and Woods (2004) and Cebula (2004), have empirically investigated a theory of ‘expressive voting.’ To some extent, Copeland and Laband (2002), along with Barreto, Segura and Woods (2004) and Cebula (2004), reflect efforts to introduce an alternative perspective as to why people vote as well as non-traditional and non-demographic variables that may explain voting behavior.

Although mitigated to a degree by the modest upward movement of voter turnout between the 2000 (51.21% turnout) and 2004 (56.7%) general elections, concern regarding low and declining voter participation rates in the U.S. nevertheless is expressed frequently in the media and elsewhere. As Putnam (2000, p. 31) states, “With the singular exception of voting, American rates of political participation compare favorably with those in other democracies ...”. Putnam (2000, p. 31) then proceeds to make the observation that “We are reminded each election year that fewer voters show up at the polls in America than in most other democracies ...”.

This observation blends with a perspective espoused by Cebula (2004, p. 218), who argues that if would-be voters feel “... politically disenfranchised from their government because ... [of] ... the [perceived] government’s unresponsiveness to their needs ... they very likely may react emotionally by adopting a ‘Why Bother Attitude’ toward voting.” In other words, greater voter apathy is manifested because of perceived lower benefits from voting. At an aggregate level, this form of expressive voting could very easily be expected of any minority cohort that perceives itself as being economically repressed or disadvantaged in the society.

Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau ([2001], Table 37), the six major ‘racial/ethnic’ groups identified are: (1) White, (2) Afro-American, (3) Asian, (4) Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, (5) American Indian or Alaskan Native, and (6) Hispanic. Groups (4) and (5) constitute very small percentages of the total U.S. population. Of these major population components in the U.S., Afro-Americans and Hispanics stand out as historically being the most economically disadvantaged on the one hand, and as having a historically low voter participation rates on the other hand, while at the same time constituting “large” minorities and hence encompassing large numbers of people.

First using data for the 2004 and 2008 general elections, and then extending the analysis to the years 2000 and 2012, this exploratory study investigates a two-part hypothesis. First, for the 2004 general election, it is hypothesized, that the higher the percentage of a state’s population that is Hispanic *or* Afro-American, the lower the state’s aggregate voter participation rate, as a reflection for both minorities of feelings of being politically disenfranchised from government and the political process (Copeland and Laband, 2002; Barreto, Segura and Woods, 2004; and Cebula, 2004). Second, since the 2008 general election boasted an Afro-American candidate nominated by the Democratic Party, the Afro-American community envisioned an opportunity to not be politically disenfranchised and

hence expected greater potential benefits from increased voter participation, and therefore manifested an increased voter participation rate, whereas the Hispanic community still experienced feelings of being politically disenfranchised and still manifested a low voter participation rate.

2. Theoretical Model

In this study, it is hypothesized that the probability that a given eligible voter will actually vote, $PROBV$, is an increasing function of her/his expected (perceived) gross benefits (EGB) associated with voting, *ceteris paribus*, and a decreasing function of her/his expected (perceived) gross costs (EGC) associated with voting, *ceteris paribus*. Accordingly, it follows that:

$$PROBV = f(EGB, EGC), f_{EGB} > 0, f_{EGC} < 0 \quad (1)$$

This study adopts the perspective that, given the complexity of the voting decision process, the concept of the EGB necessarily requires a very broad, inclusive interpretation. In most major elections, the marginal probability that one vote will make the difference is approximately zero. Nevertheless, certain circumstances or factors can potentially increase or decrease the expected benefits from voting. For instance, when there is an issue that one feels particularly strongly about, be it economic or noneconomic in nature, or when there are one or more candidates about whom one feels particularly strongly one way or another (Cebula, 2004), voting may provide *subjective* benefits to the would-be voter by serving as an *emotional release* or outlet. Alternatively stated, people can use voting to express their views and/or express/vent their *feelings*.

2.1 The Disenfranchisement/Enfranchisement Voter Participation Rate Hypothesis

We begin by focusing on the two-part hypothesis underlying this study. Specifically, minority groups who feel disenfranchised from the political process and/or feel underrepresented by, or overlooked by elected officials, perceive the expected gross benefits from voting to be minimal (or zero) and therefore since the costs of voting are non-zero, find the expected *net* benefits from voting to be minimal, if not negative. Hence, such minority *would-be* voters manifest voter apathy and often choose to not vote, *ceteris paribus*. This hypothesis is referred to as the *disenfranchisement/enfranchisement voter participation rate hypothesis*. As a *de facto* corollary to this hypothesis, but in effect just as an extension of the hypothesis, should would-be minority voters find a reason, e.g., a major party candidate, who is in the same minority category as them, the expected potential gross benefits from voting become positive, and so the expected *net* benefits from voting rise, creating an incentive to express their voting rights at the polls.

With this two-part hypothesis alleged to be in play, we initially contrast the 2004 and 2008 Presidential elections and focus upon the two largest minority groups, Hispanics and Afro-Americans. Neither major political party in the U.S. (i.e., neither Democratic nor Republican) nominated a minority candidate for either the office of President or the office of Vice President in 2004, whereas the Democratic Party nominated an Afro-American candidate for

the office of President in the 2008 election cycle. Thus, for both Hispanics and Afro-Americans, in 2004, neither minority group had a minority candidate as a Presidential nominee, and hence we would expect that in 2004 the hypothesis stated above should apply to both groups; in other words, the *disenfranchisement/enfranchisement voter participation rate hypothesis* would in theory have been manifested by both of the minority groups in question, i.e., both Hispanics and Afro-Americans would have had a lower propensity to vote in the 2004 general election.

By contrast, in 2008, since the Democratic Party nominated an Afro-American candidate, Barack Obama, for President, the extension/*de facto* corollary to the *disenfranchisement/enfranchisement voter participation rate hypothesis* would apply, namely, for this minority, the expected gross and net benefits of voting would have been increased, so that a higher voter turnout would be expected, *ceteris paribus*. Thus, in 2008, states having higher percentages of their population consisting of Afro-Americans, would be expected to have had a higher voter participation rate, *ceteris paribus*. On the other hand, since there was not a Hispanic nominee for President or Vice President put forth by either party, Hispanics arguably still had no direct additional incentive to vote, and hence states with higher percentages of the population that was Hispanic, would have had lower voter participation rates, *ceteris paribus*. The symbol HISP_j indicates the percentage of the population in state *j* that is classified as being Hispanic, and the symbol AFRO_j indicates the percentage of the population in state *j* that is classified as being Afro-American.

2.2 Other Factors Hypothesized as Influencing the Voter Participation Rate

In addition to the *disenfranchisement/enfranchisement voter participation rate hypothesis* and its corollary, following previous studies of voter participation, other factors are also included in this empirical study. For instance, it is argued that the higher the level of educational attainment, the greater may be the expected gross and thus net benefits from voting, *ceteris paribus*. Arguably, the higher one's educational attainment, the greater may be one's knowledge of and appreciation of the significance of participating *per se* in the electoral process in a democratic society. In addition, higher levels of educational attainment may imply a higher level of understanding of those issues being decided or influenced through the election process, as well as a better-informed electorate in terms of candidates' qualifications and characters. Greater average levels of educational attainment may also lead to the subjective evaluation that voting *per se* yields benefits, regardless of the election outcome, insofar as voting may serve: (a) to create positive feelings about fulfilling one's "civic duty;" (b) to create the feeling of helping to maintain the vitality and survival of the democratic process (in part, by obfuscating the free-rider); and (c) to create the feeling of helping to clarify the degree to which election victors (and the political parties with which they are affiliated) can interpret their victories as either *only marginal* or (alternatively) as a *de facto* "mandate" for implementing their espoused policies/party platforms. Thus, it is hypothesized that the greater the percentage of the population in a state *j* with at least a high school diploma (HS_j), the higher the overall percentage of eligible voters in state *j* that will vote, i.e., the higher the voter participation rate (VPR_j) in the state, *ceteris paribus*.

Of course, age may influence the expected benefits of voting (or costs of not voting). For instance, the population that is age 65 and over is effectively either retired or only part-time labor force participants. Furthermore, a substantial portion of this demographic group lives on a more or less 'fixed income' or at least depends to some non-trivial extent on fixed-income sources such as Social Security. As a result, this age group may be especially sensitive to a host of public policies and issues that can profoundly affect their economic well-being, as well as their healthcare, including Social Security policies, Medicare and Medicaid policies, effective income tax rates and other tax policies, e.g., taxation of Social Security benefits, and general economic conditions, especially inflation because it can affect living standards dramatically. Moreover, this demographic group most likely has more time at its disposal to follow issues influenced by voting or election outcomes. Indeed, by virtue of having more 'free' time, this demographic group potentially has not only a greater opportunity to educate itself on key election issues and/or candidates, but also greater time to organize among themselves on behalf of certain candidates and/or issues, and greater time to spend in line at the polls on election day. In any case, the stakes being decided, or at least influenced in the voting booth, be they represented by referenda, or initiatives, or candidates for elected office, may be greater for this demographic group than for many others. Consequently, the expected gross and net benefits from voting are most likely perceived to be greater in this demographic group than others. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that the higher the percentage of a state's population that is age 65 and older (AGE65PLUS_j), the higher the overall voter participation in that state (VPR_j), *ceteris paribus*.

The female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) may also influence the expected benefits from voting. Over time, the FLFPR in the U.S. has risen quite sharply. For example, the FLFPR rose from 39.3 percent in 1965 to 59.5 percent in 2008 (Council of Economic Advisors, 2014, Table B-39). As the FLFPR rises, the percentage of the female population in the workplace increases and arguably becomes better informed on, and arguably more sensitive to a variety of labor market and other issues. This increased awareness of and sensitivity to such issues is likely to yield an increased interest in the potential impact that their votes might exercise, i.e., as the FLFPR increases, women in the workplace may perceive a greater need to act on behalf of their own self-interests by participating to a greater degree in the electoral process. Thus, labor force participation may raise the expected benefits from voting. Hence, it is hypothesized that the higher the female labor force participation rate in state *j* (FLFPR_j), the higher the overall voter participation in that state (VPR_j), *ceteris paribus*.

Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the more poorly a state's economy is performing, e.g., the higher the unemployment rate in a state, the greater the interest the public (eligible voters) in the state may have in the outcome of a major election. If indeed the state's unemployment rate is perceived by the public as 'too high'/'excessive,' then would-be voters may wish to express their dissatisfaction with the currently high unemployment rate and/or to express their preferences for change at some level(s) of government in order to improve employment prospects. Indeed, a 'high' unemployment rate could engender fears regarding future unemployment prospects. This fear might take the form of either a worsening of the unemployment rate, or simply an unsatisfactory rate of improvement in the unemployment picture. Accordingly, the higher the unemployment

rate in state j (UR_j), the greater the expected gross and net benefits from voting (as the public uses voting to express fears and concerns regarding job loss and/or to express preferences for more effective public economic policies) and hence the greater the VPR_j in the state, *ceteris paribus*.

Next is the issue of the expected cost of the act of voting. This consideration could theoretically take many forms. In this study, we have focused on the median family income in state j (MFI_j). Arguably, the higher the MFI_j , the higher the opportunity cost of voting, i.e., the incentive to “free-ride” increases. Alternatively, higher income people may be so immersed in their work that they have neither the time to be well-informed voters to intelligently vote, nor the actual time to vote. Hence, it is hypothesized that the higher the MFI_j in a state, the lower the VPR_j in that state, *ceteris paribus*.

2.3 The Model

According to the above arguments, the model in equation (1) can be decomposed into its two basic parts, as follows:

$$EGB = g(\text{HISP}, \text{AFRO}, \text{HS}, \text{AGE65PLUS}, \text{FLFPR}, \text{UR}) \quad (2)$$

$$EGC = h(\text{MFI}) \quad (3)$$

Substituting equations (2) and (3) into equation (1), and solving for VPR yields:

$$VPR = k(\text{HISP}, \text{AFRO}, \text{HS}, \text{AGE65PLUS}, \text{FLFPR}, \text{UR}, \text{MFI}) \quad (4)$$

3. Data Sources and Empirical Results

3.1 Data Sources

Data sources for all the empirical estimations are provided in Table 1.

3.2 Empirical Results

To empirically test the two-part hypothesis described in section 2, equation (4) is estimated in linear form. Estimates for the Presidential election years 2004 and 2008 are undertaken separately from those for the Presidential election years 2000 and 2012. The results are provided in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

3.2.1 A Focus on the 2004 and 2008 Presidential Elections

Based upon the framework presented in section 2, the model of state-level voter participation rates first involves estimating the linear form of equation (4) for the years 2004 and 2008. The variable VPR_j represents the voter participation rate as a percentage of the voting age population in state j . $HISP_j$ is the percentage of the population in state j that is

Hispanic, while AFRO_j indicates the percentage of the population in state *j* that is Afro-American. HS_j is the percentage of the adult population age 25 and older in state *j* that had at least a high diploma. AGE65PLUS_j is the percent of the total population in state *j* that was age 65 or older. The variable FLFPR_j is the percentage female labor force participation rate in state *j*. UR_j is the percentage unemployment rate in state. Finally, MFI_j is the median family income in state *j*. The data cover the 50 U.S. states.

3.2.2 Empirical Results for the Presidential Election Years 2004 and 2008

The OLS estimation results for equation (4) in linear form for the election years 2004 and 2008, using the White (1980) heteroskedasticity correction are provided in Table 2, where terms in parentheses are the *t*-values. In the column for year 2004, all seven of the estimated coefficients exhibit the expected signs, with four statistically significant at the 1% level, one statistically significant at the 5% level, and one statistically significant at the 10% level. The coefficient of determination is 0.68, indicating that the model explains nearly seven-tenths of the variation in the voter participation rate by state. Finally, the *F*-statistic is significant at far beyond the 1% level, attesting to the strength of the overall model.

The estimated coefficient on the variable HS is positive and statistically significant at the 3% level. Thus, as hypothesized, it appears that the greater the percentage of the adult population in a state that has completed at least a high school diploma, the greater the state's voter participation rate. The coefficient on the variable AGE65PLUS is also positive, as hypothesized, and significant at the 1% level. Therefore, the greater the percentage of a state's population that is age 65 or older, the higher that state's voter participation rate. In addition, the estimated coefficient on the FLFPR variable is positive and statistically significant at the 1% level. Hence, as expected, the higher the female labor force participation rate in a state, the higher its aggregate voter turnout. Next, the estimated coefficient on the UR variable is positive and significant at beyond the 1% level. Hence, as expected, the greater a state's unemployment rate, the greater the state's aggregate voter participation rate, arguably another example of "expressive voting," in this case regarding feelings of dissatisfaction over the unemployment rate and/or fears regarding future unemployment prospects (Copeland and Laband, 2002; Cebula, 2004). The coefficient on variable MFI is negative, but fails to be statistically significant at even the 10% level, indicating that this variable does not appear to play a significant role in the decision to vote.

Focusing now on the variables representing minority voters, AFRO and HISP, the coefficient on the variable AFRO is negative and statistically significant at the 10% level, whereas the coefficient on the variable HISP is negative and statistically significant at the 1% level. Thus, as in accord with the *disenfranchisement/enfranchisement voter participation rate hypothesis*, the higher the percentage of a state's population that is either Afro-American or Hispanic, the lower the state's aggregate voter participation rate, arguably a reflection of feelings of political disenfranchisement from government and the related lower level of expected benefits from voting.

In the column for 2008, two of the estimated coefficients are statistically significant at the 1% level, two are statistically significant at the 5% level, and one is statistically significant at the 10% level. Thus, it appears that the voter participation rate (VPR) is an increasing function of the unemployment rate, the percentage of the population age 25 and over with at least a high school diploma, and the female labor force participation rate. These results parallel their counterparts for the 2004 Presidential election.

In addition, the VPR is, at the 10% statistical level, a decreasing function of the percentage of the population that is Hispanic (HISP); this is similar to the result for 2004, although with a much lower degree of statistical significance. However, the coefficient on the variable AFRO is now *positive* and statistically significant at the 3% level. Arguably, this result implies that the presence of an Afro-American candidate for President elevated the expected gross and net benefits of voting for Afro-Americans, and thusly elevated their voter participation rate. These results are consistent with the *disenfranchisement/enfranchisement voter participation rate hypothesis*.

3.2.3 Empirical Results for the Presidential Election Years 2000 and 2012

The OLS estimation results for equation (4) in linear form for the election years 2000 and 2012, using the White (1980) heteroskedasticity correction are provided in Table 3. In the column for year 2000, two coefficients are statistically significant at the 1% level, two coefficients are statistically significant at the 5% level, and two coefficients are statistically significant at the 10% level. The VPR is shown to be an increasing function of the unemployment rate (UR), the percent of the population age 25 and older with at least a high school diploma (HS), the female labor force participation rate (FLFPR), and the percent of the population age 65 and over (AGE65PLUS). These results are effectively compatible with those in Table 2. Furthermore, the coefficient on the minority variable HISP is negative and statistically significant at the 1% level, whereas that on the variable AFRO is negative and statistically significant at the 10% level. These latter two results could be interpreted as supporting the *disenfranchisement/enfranchisement voter participation rate hypothesis*. This is because neither Hispanic would-be voters nor Afro-American would-be voters expected perceptible gross or net benefits from voting because neither the Republican nor Democratic parties nominated a minority candidate for President or Vice President in the year 2000.

Now consider the results in Table 3 for the election year 2012, when President Obama ran for re-election. The VPR is an increasing function of UR, FLFPR, and HS and a decreasing function of MFI. Regarding the minority variables, the VPR is a decreasing function of HISP (10% statistical significance level) and an increasing function of AFRO (1% statistical significance level). Given the presence of an Afro-American on the Democratic ticket for President, and the absence of a Hispanic candidate on either the Republican or Democratic tickets, these two results could be interpreted as supporting the *disenfranchisement/enfranchisement voter participation rate hypothesis*. The reasoning is that given the nominees for President and Vice President, Hispanic would-be voters experienced *no* perceptibly higher level of expected gross and net benefits of voting, while Afro-American would-be voters arguably *did* experience higher levels of expected gross and net benefits of voting.

4. Summary and Conclusions

This exploratory empirical study has provided preliminary evidence that supports what is referred to here as the *disenfranchisement voter participation rate hypothesis*. Essentially, if either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party nominates a minority candidate, be that candidate Hispanic or Afro-American, the hypothesis would argue that the minority candidacy would empower the minority in question by elevating the *expected* gross and net benefits of voting for members of that minority, leading to a rise in the overall voter participation rate. Thus, expectations drive much of the motivation to vote.

Two observations appear to be noteworthy. First, the hypothesis proposed here potentially could be applied to non-Presidential elections, e.g., Senatorial, Congressional or Gubernatorial elections, in order to test more rigorously for validity. Second, arguably more credible and hence potentially much more useful results could be generated by using the voter turnout rate of *registered* voters, a figure that is known with a high degree of accuracy, rather than the voter-eligible population. This is because the latter may be less dependable, i.e., is arguably a less accurate dataset, if for no other reason than our lack of accurate knowledge regarding the total population of each state. Perhaps the latter observation is best exemplified by our rather imperfect knowledge regarding the magnitude of the undocumented immigrant population in all of the U.S. states (Pew Hispanic Institute, 2013).

Endnotes

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1. For the interested reader, it is observed that multicollinearity was not a problem. The correlation matrix among the explanatory variable will be supplied upon e-mail request.

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Table 1. Data Sources for the Variables

Variable	Data Sources
VPRj	U.S. Census Bureau (2002, Table 767; 2006, Table 789; 2010, Table 691), Bipartisan Policy Center (2014)
HISPj	U.S. Census Bureau (2002, Table 24; 2006, Table 16; 2010, Table 19), U.S. Census Bureau (2012)
AFROj	U.S. Census Bureau (2002, Table 24; 2006, Table 16; 2010, Table 19), U.S. Census Bureau (2012)
HSj	U.S. Census Bureau (2010, Table 228; 2006, Table 218; 2010, Table 228), U.S. Census Bureau (2012)
AGE65PLUS	U.S. Census Bureau (2002, Table 21; 2006, Table 21; 2010, Table 16), U.S. Census Bureau (2012).
FLFPR	U.S. Census Bureau (2002, Table 672; 2006, Table 681; 2010, Table 580), U.S. Census Bureau (2012).
UR	U.S. Census Bureau (2002, Table 672; 2006, Table 681; 2010, Table 580), U.S. Census Bureau (2012)
MFI	U.S. Census Bureau (2002, Table 767; 2006, Table 789; 2010, Table 691), U.S. Census Bureau (2012)

Table 2. Heteroskedasticity-Corrected OLS Findings for 2004 and 2008 Voter Participation Rate Determinants

Dependent Variable: VPRj		
Explanatory Variable	2004	2008
HISP	-0.251*** (-2.78)	-0.091* (-1.80)
AFRO	-0.058* (-1.76)	0.17* (2.28)
HS	0.508** (2.23)	1.069*** (3.04)
FLFPR	0.960*** (3.48)	0.669** (2.30)
UR	2.81*** (3.33)	1.384*** (2.72)
AGE65PLUS	1.195*** (3.40)	0.475* (1.72)
MFI	-0.00004 (-0.54)	-0.00014 (-1.57)
Constant	-69.5	-79.8
R ²	0.68	0.62
Adj R ²	0.62	0.55
F	12.59***	9.72***

***Statistically significant at 1% level; **statistically significant at 5% level, and *statistically significant at 10% level.

Table 3. Heteroskedasticity-Corrected OLS Findings for 2000 and 2012 Voter Participation Rate Determinants

Dependent Variable: VPRj		
Explanatory Variable	2004	2008
HISP	-0.299*** (-3.12)	-0.068* (-1.75)
AFRO	-0.148* (-1.78)	0.281*** (3.18)
HS	0.214** (2.08)	1.17*** (3.36)
FLFPR	0.734*** (3.57)	0.945*** (3.06)
UR	1.51** (2.08)	0.827** (2.07)
AGE65PLUS	0.612* (1.72)	0.384 (1.08)
MFI	-0.00015 (-0.97)	-0.00028** (-2.03)
Constant	-26.4	-102.0
R ²	0.63	0.60
Adj R ²	0.57	0.53
F	10.29***	8.84***

***Statistically significant at 1% level; **statistically significant at 5% level, and *statistically significant at 10% level.