

Civic Duty and Social Pressure as Causes of Voter Turnout

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In his learned synthesis of theories and evidence on voter turnout, *To Vote or Not to Vote?*, Andre Blais (2000) argues that most citizens believe that voting is a civic duty or obligation. With characteristic wit, Blais likens failure to vote as a “venial sin,” a misdeed that is wrong but forgivable (p.92). These feelings of obligation, he argues, cause many people to vote who would otherwise abstain on the grounds that their vote has an infinitesimal chance of altering the outcome. Blais’ argument is slightly different from that of Riker and Ordeshook (1968), who argue that the utility derived from doing one’s civic duty makes voting rational because it outweighs the expenditure of time and effort. Blais contends that costs and benefits play no role in the voting calculus of people who feel that voting is an obligation. Only those with a weak sense of civic duty base their turnout decisions on instrumental considerations such as convenience and opportunity costs (p.102).

Blais’ evidence for the claim that civic duty is both a proximal cause of voting and a psychological force that overcomes the collective action problem comes from four sources. First, Blais adduces survey evidence from the United States, Canada, United, Kingdom, and France to show that most citizens in these countries believe that voting is a duty or obligation (p.95). Second, he argues that the support for norms of civic duty expressed in survey responses is more than mere lip service. When students in a German lab are given an opportunity to forgo their right to vote in return for large sums of money, the vast majority refuse (p.97). Third, he revisits his depth interviews with regular voters from Montreal and notes that voters overwhelmingly regard political participation as a civic obligation, although people feel less obligation to vote in low salience elections involving

issues to which they feel little connection. Finally, a multivariate regression of voter turnout on measures of civic duty and other factors show that a scale measuring commitment to statements such as “It is the duty of every citizen to vote” is a very strong predictor. In sum, civic duty is a widely recognized norm that is powerfully correlated with voter turnout.

One of the most important empirical claims in *To Vote or Not to Vote?* concerns the relationship between civic duty and social pressure. Although the conviction that voting is a civic duty might cause one to feel guilty about not voting, Blais argues that the effects of civic duty are not reducible to instrumental concerns about ostracism by one’s family or peers in the event that one failed to vote (p.103). Fewer than half the respondents in his surveys believe that others would disapprove of them if they were to fail to vote, and this belief does not predict voter turnout (p.105). The bottom line of Blais’ investigation is that “it is an internalized sense of duty and not the presence of social pressures that induces people to vote.” (p.104)

My aim in this paper is to revisit the claim that civic duty matters while social pressure does not. Since the publication of *To Vote or Not to Vote?* in 2000, a large experimental literature has emerged in the domain of voter turnout. Much of this literature evaluates the effectiveness of voter mobilization tactics ranging from door-to-door canvassing to televised public service announcements, but recent years have witnessed a surge of scholarly interest in what Blais called “social pressure.” Instead of gauging the effects of social pressure by asking people to imagine how others would react if they were

to abstain and using that measure to predict voter turnout, experimental investigations of social pressure tests its effects by deploying an array of voter mobilization messages that vary in terms of the amount of social pressure they exert. The causal effect of social pressure is then assessed by comparing the turnout rates of groups that were randomly assigned different messages.

The experimental approach has a number of advantages but also some important limitations. One advantage is that random assignment facilitates causal inference. Consider the drawbacks of an observational study, in which the “treatment” is a feeling, belief, or attitude that was “assigned” in some unknown way. The correlation between voting and feelings of civic duty observed in non-experimental research may be spurious: those who say that voting is an obligation may be more prone to vote for other unmeasured reasons, such as the fact that they are in the habit of voting and feel comfortable doing it. Random assignment ensures that the subjects who are assigned the treatment group have the same expected potential outcomes as those who are assigned to the control group. Another advantage of the experimental approach is that the researcher controls the intervention and can change it in order to test specific theories. The researcher who studies non-experimental data must rely on the treatments that nature provides, and survey measures of those treatments are often unreliable. A third advantage of field experimental studies of voter turnout is that they generally rely on official records of voter turnout, whereas most survey-based observational studies rely on voters’ self-reports. Self-reports introduce the possibility of bias because respondents who portray themselves as committed to norms of civic duty may be more inclined to falsely report that they voted

in recent elections. Two important limitations of experiments on voter turnout should also be mentioned at the outset. One is that they seldom assess the effects of their interventions on political attitudes (for an exception, see Bedolla and Michelson 2012), and therefore the researcher must make some assumptions when attributing the mobilizing effects of certain treatments to the subjects' thought processes. As we will see below, linking experimental treatments to civic duty and social pressure requires some guesswork. Second, the range of possible treatments, subjects, and electoral contexts is vast, and a great deal of experimentation may be necessary in order to understand when and why an intervention exerts an effect. Experimental science takes mincing steps.

This essay begins by explaining the theoretical underpinnings of social pressure, as they relate to the calculus of voter turnout. Next, we review the burgeoning literature on social pressure and voter turnout, calling attention to the gaps and anomalies in the experimental data base. We conclude by arguing that although the effects of social pressure seem to be much stronger than Blais argued, they also seem to depend on a strong assertion of the norm of civic duty. This pattern suggests a possible synthesis of the civic duty and social pressure hypotheses: social pressure works when norms of civic duty are made salient.

Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Selective Benefits

The collective action problem as applied to the problem of voter turnout may be stated as follows: When each person's contribution to the collective cause is negligible and the outcome

can be enjoyed even by people who do not contribute, no individual has an incentive to sacrifice for a collective cause. The fact that large numbers of people do in fact vote has led scholars to posit that “selective incentives” (Olson 1965) induce people to participate in elections. One type of selective incentive is the intrinsic satisfaction that one feels when casting a ballot. Voters may either enjoy the act of voting per se or feel good about themselves for advancing a partisan cause or honoring a civic obligation. Most of the literature on the paradox of voter turnout refers to feelings of civic duty as a possible solution (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). A second type of selective incentive involves extrinsic rewards: people receive side-payments for voting. In electoral systems where bribes and other material inducements are rare, incentives are thought to be social in nature: voters are rewarded by the approbation of others, while nonvoters are criticized or shunned. In other words, people are rewarded or punished according to whether they comply with social norms (Cialdini and Trost 1985), such as the expectation that citizens ought to participate in elections.

This latter type of selective incentive has recently been the focus of active scholarly investigation. Research on the effects of “social pressure” has centered on interventions that play upon a basic human drive to win praise and avoid chastisement. Experimental communications exert social pressure by praising those who uphold norms or scolding those who violate them. Although experimental treatments vary, social pressure communications typically involve some combination of three ingredients: they admonish the receiver to adhere to a social norm, indicate that the receiver’s compliance will be monitored, and suggest that the monitored behavior will be disclosed to others.

This identification strategy is quite different from the one that Blais uses. His survey measures ask subjects whether they would anticipate social disapprobation from friends or family in the event they did not vote. One's family and friends are not randomly assigned, and neither are one's perceptions of their reactions to nonvoting. The experiments presented below confront subjects with social norms that are enforced by the person sending the experimental message, who in some cases discloses (or threatens to disclose) information about voter turnout to others in the household or neighborhood.

Social pressure is relatively easy to operationalize in terms of experimental treatments. As the experiments summarized below illustrate, there are many ways of putting voters on notice that their participation in elections is being monitored and disclosed to others. More challenging is the experimental manipulation of civic duty. Creating deep-seated feelings of civic obligation is beyond the scope of an ordinary experiment, and even experiments that have randomly exposed high school students to civics classes have found it difficult to enhance commitment to this social norm (Green et al. 2011). Less ambitious and more tractable is the aim of priming norms of civic duty by couching appeals to vote in terms of doing one's civic duty. The complication, however, is that admonishing citizens to do their civic duty both primes their sense of civic obligation and suggests that failure to vote would meet with disapprobation. Although civic duty and social pressure inevitably overlap to some extent, one may fruitfully investigate the interaction between intervention that assert norms and interventions that enforce norms. Do civic duty appeals work without monitoring or disclosure? Do monitoring and disclosure work when little is said about civic duty? As we review the experimental evidence, special attention is paid to the question of whether monitoring and disclosure interact with the forcefulness with

which civic duty appeals are made. We will see that monitoring and disclosure only have powerful effects when used in conjunction with strong statements about civic duty.

Social Pressure and Civic Duty: An Overview of Experimental Evidence

Field experiments that test the effects of social pressure date back to Gosnell's (1927) pioneering study of voting in the 1924 election, in which he mailed Chicagoans political cartoons depicting non-voters as unpatriotic "slackers." The idea of revealing to voters that their participation in elections will be monitored dates back at least to Gross, Schmidt, Keating, and Saks (1974), who tested its effects on voter turnout in college campus elections. Recently, this line of inquiry was revived by Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2008), whose experimental study of social pressure sparked a series of follow-up experiments that shed light on the conditions under which social pressure's effects are large or small. We therefore begin with the Gerber et al. (2008) study and discuss how the interpretation of its results has evolved in the wake of subsequent research.

Set in the context of a low-salience 2006 primary election in Michigan, the Gerber et al. (2008) experiment involved five randomly assigned groups, a control group consisting of 100,000 households and four groups of 10,000 households apiece that received a single piece of mail. The first treatment group was reminded that voting is a civic duty. The second group (the "Hawthorne" condition) was told that they were part of a study that would monitor whether they voted but would not contact them further. A third group received the "Self" mailing, which indicated that voting is a matter of public record and presented an official-looking log of whether

each member of the household voted in two recent elections. The fourth treatment group received the “Neighbors” mailing, which included not only the voting records of those in the household but also others living on the block. Both the Self and Neighbors mailing also promised a follow-up mailing that updates the voting log with turnout records from the upcoming election.¹ As is the case in all of the field experiments described here, outcomes were measured using official records indicating which subjects actually voted.

The results in Table 1 show a clear progression: the more social pressure a mailing exerts, the stronger the treatment effect.² The control group voted at a rate of 29.7%. The weakest of the treatments, the civic duty mailing, increased turnout to 31.5%.³ Viewed in isolation, this increase in turnout might seem fairly small, but bear in mind that a slew of large-scale experiments on the effects of direct mail have found it to have negligible effects on turnout. For example, the direct mail experiments reported by Gerber and Green (2000) and Bedolla and Michelson (2012) suggest that mailings that stress the importance of doing one’s civic duty ordinarily have effects of 0.5 percentage points or less. Why does the civic duty mailing have roughly three times the effect of the typical piece of voter mobilization mail? What seems to set the civic duty mailer in the Gerber et al. (2008) study apart is its confrontational tone. In contrast to the civic duty mailings distributed by Gerber and Green (2000), which highlight the sacrifices that others have made for the freedoms we enjoy, the mailings in Gerber et al. (2008) lectures the reader: “Why do so many people fail to vote? We've been talking about this problem for years,

¹ Although this feature of the design maximizes the strength of the intervention, it confounds the presentation of an official-looking turnout record (which adds credence to the idea that voting records are going to be monitored) with the disclosure of one’s turnout record to others. Below we consider some experiments (e.g., Abrajano and Panagopoulos 2009; Matland and Murray 2011) that present turnout records without promising disclosure of the records to others.

² All contrasts with the control group are statistically significant at the 5% level.

³ This effect was replicated in another large-scale experiment conducted the following year, also in Michigan. See Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2010).

but it only seems to get worse. The whole point of democracy is that citizens are active participants in government; that we have a voice in government. Your voice starts with your vote. On August 8, remember your rights and responsibilities as a citizen. Remember to vote.”

The next arm of the Gerber et al. (2008) experiment assessed the “Hawthorne effect” of alerting voters to the fact that their behavior will be observed by researchers. This treatment was designed to assess the effects of surveillance without any overt social pressure; recipients of this mailing were assured that they would not be contacted, and the results, drawn from public records, would remain confidential. This treatment, which involved both researcher surveillance and an injunction to do one’s civic duty, proved to be a significantly stronger inducement to vote than civic duty alone. Turnout in this group was, 32.2% which was 2.5 percentage-points higher than the control group. In conjunction with a strong injunction to do one’s civic duty, surveillance increases turnout.

Much stronger is the Self treatment, which combines a civic duty appeal with two other ingredients, household members’ official voter turnout records in previous elections and notification that these records would be updated to reflect turnout in the upcoming election. In other words, the Self mailer accentuates the surveillance message of the Hawthorne mailing by demonstrating that voter turnout is observable in public records and adds a promise to monitor and disclose future behavior. Individuals sent the Self mailing voted at a rate of 34.5%, which is 4.8 percentage-points higher than the control group, implying a 16% increase in turnout. This effect increases substantially when subjects are presented with both their own vote histories and those of the neighbors, again with a promise to update and distribute these vote histories. Individuals sent the Neighbors mailing voted at a rate of 37.8%, which is 8.1 percentage points

higher than the control group. This estimated treatment effect is among the strongest ever observed in a large-scale randomized voter mobilization experiment.

Having described the results of the Gerber et al. (2008) experiment, let's now consider how interpretation of the results has evolved in the wake of subsequent experimental research. First, let's rule out the notion that there is something idiosyncratic about the Gerber et al. (2008) results that renders them irreproducible. Gerber et al. (2010) report the results of a follow-up experiment conducted amid Michigan's municipal elections of 2007. The study tested the Civic Duty and Self treatments and found essentially the same results as in 2006. The Self treatment was also used in a 2009 congressional special election in Illinois, again producing similar results (Sinclair, McConnell, and Green 2012). Mann's use of the Self treatment in a 2007 Kentucky gubernatorial race generated a similar percentage increase in turnout (the absolute percentage point increase in turnout was smaller due to the very low participation rates in his samples). The only instance in which the Self mailing failed to generate at least the 16% increase in turnout observed in the Gerber et al. (2008) study was the Abrajano and Panagopoulos (2011) study of Hispanic voter mobilization in a special election in Queens. Turnout was extremely low (3.94%) in the control group, and the English language version of the Self mailer produced a turnout rate of 5.05% (a 28% increase), but the Spanish language version produced a turnout rate of only 4.18% (a 6% increase). On average, the two treatments generated a 17% turnout increase. In short, when researchers employed mailings that were similar to the Gerber et al. (2008) treatments, they obtained results that varied no more than would be expected by sampling variability.

Now let's consider some experiments that investigated the effects of alternative treatments. Panagopoulos (2010, forthcoming) tested the effects of presenting registered voters

with the chance to be on an honor roll if public records show that they voted in an upcoming election. In the first study, the mailing promised to publish the names of voters in a local newspaper; the second study presented a list of neighbors with exemplary voting records and invited the voter to join this honored group by voting in the upcoming gubernatorial election. Both treatments produced positive effects, although the second study's effects were about half as large as the Self mailer's effect. Even larger effects, albeit with a large margin of statistical uncertainty, were obtained when mailings threatened to shame nonvoters by putting their names in a local newspaper.

One might surmise from these studies that surveillance and disclosure have powerful effects on voter turnout, but this interpretation is challenged by three recent experiments. Panagopoulos (2011) sought to develop a version of the Self treatment that made people aware that their participation in elections was being observed but in a friendly, non-confrontational manner. By thanking voters for their participation in a recent election, his mailings reminded voters that voting is observable, but the tone of the mailing is altogether different from the scolding Self mailing. Panagopoulos demonstrates that the Thank You mailing increased turnout in three different electoral settings, with effects that are roughly two-thirds as large as the Self mailing's effect. One interpretation of these results is that revealing vote history in a friendly way exerts less social pressure than the Self mailing, but Panagopoulos also shows that the Thank You mailings are equally effective when recipients are praised for being concerned about public affairs, with no mention of past voting. Evidently, the gratitude effect is distinct from the effects of social pressure, and presenting voters with information about their past votes does not make these mailings more effective.

Two further clues about why the Self mailer works come from experiments that change its ingredients. Matland and Murray (2011) randomly vary whether their mailers present recipients with their vote history in previous elections and find that vote history per se has relatively weak effects on turnout. What makes this finding interesting is that the tone of the mailing is quite different from the Self mailing used by Gerber et al. (2008). (See appendix for wording of the two mailings). The wording of the Self mailing is confrontational, notifying the reader that a “different approach” (i.e., monitoring voter turnout) is needed to get people to do their civic duty; Matland and Murray’s mailing does not explain why vote history is being presented, nor do they threaten to update the recipient’s voting record. The weak effects they obtain seem to suggest that surveillance is effective if it is directly linked to a forceful statement about civic duty. A second suggestive piece of evidence on this point comes from a phone-banking experiment conducted by Green, Larimer, and Paris (2010). The sample consisted of voters who had not cast a ballot by early afternoon on Election Day; the treatment was a late afternoon call using a script that emphasized that voter turnout was being monitored:

Hi. This is (*caller's name*) calling on behalf of Vote 2009. It’s Election Day, and we’re checking off names as people vote at (**location of polling place**). According to this list, you haven’t voted yet - they’re open until (**hour**) - are you planning to vote? [**Pause for answer**] Thanks - I’ll let them know.

This treatment seemed to have relatively weak effects. The effect of the treatment on those who were reached by callers was 1.7 percentage points with a standard error of 1.7 percentage points. One interpretation of this result is that monitoring is not sufficient to increase turnout. This

script did not mention civic duty, nor did it encourage voting. This experiment did not feature a direct comparison of a monitoring-only treatment with a monitoring-plus-duty treatment, but that test now seems to be the logical next step in this line of experimental inquiry.

Discussion

On the surface, experimental evidence seems to contradict Blais' claim that civic duty causes voter turnout but social pressure does not. A series of large-scale experiments appear to demonstrate that as social pressure mounts, voter turnout rises. This interpretation, however, must be qualified by another set of large-scale experiments that show that social pressure by itself or paired with expressions of gratitude is insufficient to generate substantial gains in turnout. Although a definitive experiment has yet to be conducted, the evidence now seems to suggest that social pressure exerts a powerful effect when combined with a forceful statement about civic obligation. Social pressure appears to work not because surveillance per se intimidates people into voting but rather because it pushes people to do act in a manner that is consistent with their convictions about civic duty.

Several fruitful lines of further investigation suggestion themselves, some involving new interventions, others involving new methodological procedures, and still others looking at the interaction between treatments and subjects' attributes. First, our conjecture about the interaction between social pressure and civic duty must be tested directly using a series of treatments that vary whether civic duty norms are asserted forcefully and whether they are paired with surveillance and disclosure. A related line of inquiry is to prime feelings of civic duty in more subtle ways to see if social pressure's effects are heightened in the wake of these primes.

Another next step is calibrating effects against one another in a more systematic fashion. One shortcoming of the existing literature on social pressure is that only some of the studies use an established treatment (such as the Self treatment) as a benchmark to which other treatments are compared. As a result, one cannot tell whether study-to-study variation in estimated effects reflects the treatments, electoral context, or subject pool. A synoptic experiment would enable researchers to compare treatments holding context and subject pool constant.

A further challenge is to link experimental interventions with more detailed measurement of individual attitudes. One practical way to do this would be to initially conduct a large survey that measures civic attitudes; respondents to this survey would then become subjects in a seemingly unrelated experiment testing the effects of social pressure. This type of study would help assess whether, as Blais suggests, those with a high degree of commitment to civic duty norms, are less responsive to interventions that affect the calculus of voting. One intriguing possibility is that social pressure appeals only work when directed at people who are committed to the norm of voting, in which case we might conclude that social pressure works not because it imposes additional extrinsic costs on nonvoters but rather because it accentuates the intrinsic motivation to vote among those committed to the voting norm.

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Table 1: The Effects of Different Forms of Social Pressure Mail on Voter Turnout, 2006⁴

	Experimental Group				
	Control (Not Mailed)	Civic Duty (Encouraged to Vote)	Hawthorne (Encouraged & Monitored)	Self (Encouraged, Monitored, Shown Own Past Voting)	Neighbors (Encouraged, Monitored, Shown Own & Others' Past Voting)
Percent Voting	29.7%	31.5%	32.2%	34.5%	37.8%
N of Individuals	191,243	38,218	38,204	38,218	38,201

⁴ Source: Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008.