

**Are Voting Norms Conditional? How Electoral Context and Peer Behavior Shape the Social Returns to Voting**

David Doherty  
Loyola University Chicago  
Political Science Department  
1032 W. Sheridan Road, Coffey Hall, 3rd Floor  
Chicago, IL 60660  
ddoherty@luc.edu

Conor M. Dowling  
University of Mississippi  
Department of Political Science  
235 Deupree Hall  
PO Box 1848, University, MS 38677-1848  
cdowling@olemiss.edu

Alan S. Gerber  
Yale University  
Department of Political Science  
Institution for Social and Policy Studies  
77 Prospect Street, PO Box 208209  
New Haven, CT 06520-8209  
alan.gerber@yale.edu

Gregory A. Huber  
Yale University  
Department of Political Science  
Institution for Social and Policy Studies  
77 Prospect Street, PO Box 208209  
New Haven, CT 06520-8209  
gregory.huber@yale.edu

**ABSTRACT**

Research on turnout in presidential elections has shown that “battleground” state status has modest effects on turnout, raising the question of why individuals vote even in non-competitive states. We present experimental evidence showing that the typically small effect of battleground status on turnout may be tied to the fact that voting norms are insensitive to whether a given individual’s vote is likely to affect the outcome of an election. Instead, variability in the social rewards to voting are more closely tied to the behaviors of others.

**Keywords:** turnout, voting, norms, experiment

Supplementary material for this article is available in the appendix in the online addition.

Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse

(<http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/jop>).

The studies reported in this article were conducted in compliance with relevant laws and were deemed exempt by institutional review boards.

A notable pattern about presidential election participation in the United States is that turnout is relatively insensitive to whether a state is a contested “battleground” in which the vote is likely to be close in that state and, in the event the race is close, the state-level result might affect the outcome of the presidential race. Individuals living in so-called “battleground” states are only slightly more likely to participate than those living in states where the outcome is a foregone conclusion (Lipsitz 2009). Although the “battleground effect” has increased somewhat in recent years, this has taken place at a time when presidential campaigns are more narrowly targeting their mobilization and persuasion resources to these states (Enos and Fowler 2016). More generally, compared to the sizable gap between presidential and midterm election turnout, the “battleground effect” remains small.

One potential explanation for the relatively consistent level of presidential election turnout across the states is strong norms encouraging participation (Blais 2000, ch 5). Although there is some debate, norms are typically described as internalized, socially enforced rules regarding how one should behave that affect how individuals act, as well as how they evaluate others (Gibbs 1965). These norms are among the psychological and social forces rational choice scholars (e.g., Riker and Ordeshook 1968) used to explain participation in elections where casting one’s vote is very unlikely to decide the outcome, such as in uncontested presidential election states where the outcome of the race is a foregone conclusion. Empirical evidence suggests that these norms are widespread and that people expect them to be enforced. Perceptions regarding how others would respond to one’s failure to vote are associated with both reported (Abrams et al. 2011) and county-level observed turnout (Gerber et al. 2016). Voter mobilization experiments that use treatments that emphasize peer voting (Bond et al. 2012) and contact (Sinclair et al. 2013) or threaten revelation of the failure to participate (Gerber et al. 2008) are also associated with increased participation. More generally, social interactions help develop shared expectations about appropriate behavior that affect subsequent participation (Campbell 2006; Mutz 1998; Settle et al. 2011).

Can these norms explain why turnout rates in presidential elections are largely insensitive to variation in competitiveness across states? Although prior work links norms to turnout, it does not examine how those social norms do or do not vary across context (cf. Blais 2000). Thus, our work

improves our understanding of an important political behavior, voting, by documenting the social norms people express in their evaluations of others. For norms to explain why people vote even when their vote is essentially certain to be irrelevant to the outcome of an election, those norms would need to be insensitive to the expected likelihood that an individual vote would determine an election outcome. In the context of presidential elections this might be thought of in terms of whether an individual lives in a “battleground” state. More broadly, we can think of this in terms of whether the outcome of any given election is expected to be close.

We report findings from three survey experiments that offer insight into the nexus between social norms and presidential election participation. Specifically, we examine the effect of voting norms conditional on three factors that are thought to play a role in individuals’ decisions regarding whether or not to vote in an election: 1) whether their state is a “battleground” state, 2) the likelihood that their vote will prove pivotal, and 3) the expected behavior of others. We use outward facing evaluations of the behavior of others as a proxy for individuals’ expectations about how others will evaluate their own behavior. We adopt this approach because social norms are believed to be widely held and enforced by those one regularly interacts with.<sup>1</sup> Thus, how an individual evaluates others is likely to reflect the standards they expect their peers to impose. This expectation is supported by existing work that argues that norms are deeply embedded in individuals’ social networks (e.g., Campbell 2006).

In both our original study and a replication, we find that participatory norms, measured as how a respondent reports they would evaluate someone else who voted or not in a specific set of circumstances, are largely insensitive to whether an individual’s vote is likely to play a role in determining election outcomes. In evaluating others, individuals who participate only when their state is likely to decide the presidential race or when a specific race is likely to be close are viewed only marginally more favorably than those who do not participate at all, and substantially less favorably than those who participate regardless of these contextual features. Thus, assuming both that evaluations of others reveal how

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<sup>1</sup> Inward facing evaluations, by contrast, may be more likely to be influenced by social desirability biases.

individuals anticipate being evaluated by their peers and also that individuals are concerned about the social rewards and sanctions those social evaluators can provide, a uniform expectation that individuals should vote may help to explain the paucity of variation in rates of turnout between “safe” and “battleground” states in presidential races. More broadly, individuals award little “partial credit” to those who vote only when a race is expected to be competitive.

At the same time, we find clearer evidence that norms of participation depend on the behavior of others. Compared to those who do not vote at all, people can reap about half of the social rewards associated with always (rather than never) voting by voting only when those they know are also likely to vote. This last finding raises the possibility that patterns of differences in participation across types of elections may be self-reinforcing. In settings like presidential elections where most people vote or in national elections in many other countries, failing to vote even for sincere instrumental reasons leaves one open to social disapprobation, whereas in settings like midterm elections where turnout tends to be lower, the social penalty for failing to participate is reduced. In light of this finding, in the conclusion we return to the question of what explains the variation in patterns of behavior across elections contexts, countries, and different forms of political behavior.

### **Survey Experiments Designed to Examine the Conditionality of Social Voting Norms**

We report findings from two surveys, each of which recruited participants through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) interface.<sup>2</sup> In each survey respondents first completed a battery of demographic questions, followed by two of three experiments: 1) *Battleground Status*, 2) *Election Closeness*, and 3) *Peer Behavior*. (The order of the two experiments respondents completed was randomized.) In each, we asked respondents to imagine that they had just met an individual and to evaluate him/her. Specifically, respondents rated their agreement with three statements designed to

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<sup>2</sup> Full text of the MTurk requests, and more details about MTurk, are included in the Online Appendix. In addition, we summarize the demographic characteristics of respondents to each survey in columns (1) and (2) of Online Appendix Table A1.

capture broad social evaluations of the target individual: (1) “My overall impression of this person is positive”; (2) “I think this person is responsible”; (3) “I respect this person.” These items were taken from a larger questionnaire used by social psychologists to measure respondents’ broad social evaluations toward an individual (Graziano et al. 2007; Snyder and Haugen 1994).<sup>3</sup> For each vignette, responses to these three items were combined into an additive index ranging from -3 to 3 with higher values corresponding to more socially favorable evaluations.

In the *Battleground Status* experiment we varied the voting behavior and battleground status of the target individual’s state—i.e., whether the target’s decision to vote depended on whether their state was likely to determine the national election outcome. In describing the individual, the text indicated that they (1) “don’t vote in presidential elections, even when the outcome in their state is likely to determine the national election outcome,” (2) only vote when the outcome in their state is likely to determine the national election outcome<sup>4</sup>, or (3) “vote in presidential elections, even when the outcome in their state is unlikely to determine the national election outcome.”

The *Election Closeness* experiment also pertained to the nexus between the target’s voting

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<sup>3</sup> Although our theoretical question is different, our finding is consistent with other work showing politics increasingly affects what are ostensibly non-political judgments (e.g., Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

<sup>4</sup> The experiment included two treatment conditions that described the target as only voting when their state was likely to determine the outcome of the election: “only vote in presidential elections when the outcome in their state is likely to determine the national election outcome” and “don’t vote in presidential elections when the outcome in their state is unlikely to determine the national election outcome.” We included both to account for the possibility of framing effects—people responding differently when the description highlights when the target abstains from voting as opposed to highlighting the conditions under which the target participates. However, in each survey our analysis indicates that the effects of the two treatments were statistically indistinguishable ( $p=0.982$  and  $p=.635$  in Study 1 and 2, respectively). Thus, in the analysis that follows we collapse these two conditions.

behavior and the likelihood that their vote would determine the outcome of the election. However, here the behavior was not linked specifically to voting in presidential elections. In this vignette the target individual was described by saying that they (1) “don’t vote both when an election is expected to be close or when an election is not expected to be close,” (2) “vote when an election is expected to be close, but don’t vote when an election is not expected to be close,” or (3) “vote both when an election is expected to be close and when an election is not expected to be close.” Because the *Battleground Status* and *Election Closeness* experiments both pertain to expectations regarding the likelihood that an individual voters’ choice would prove decisive to the election outcome, participants were randomly assigned to complete only one of these two experiments.

The *Peer Behavior* experiment was designed to consider the possibility that the social rewards and penalties associated with voting behavior depend on expected levels of participation. The vignette indicated that the target individual was someone who 1) “vote[s] when most of the people they know are going to vote,” 2) “[doesn’t] vote even when most of the people they know are going to vote,” 3) “[doesn’t] vote when most of the people they know are not going to vote,” or 4) “vote[s] even when most of the people they know are not going to vote.”<sup>5</sup>

In each experiment, the description of the target individual also included two additional pieces of information about that individual, drawn at random from a set of eight pairs of characteristics (see the Online Appendix for details). Many of these treatments significantly affected evaluations of the target (see Online Appendix Table A2). Thus, this additional information has the benefits of masking the purpose of the experiment, adding depth to the description of the target individual, and providing a basis

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<sup>5</sup> In Study 1 respondents were randomly assigned to complete either the *Peer Behavior* experiment or an experiment that varied an individual’s level of participatory behavior across election types (presidential versus midterm). Because it simultaneously varied both election type and level of participatory behavior, however, it cannot be used to distinguish the effects of these two factors. All respondents in Study 2 completed the *Peer Behavior* experiment.

for comparing the magnitude of political effects to other norms.

### Analysis and Results

Complete OLS regression models for each experiment from each survey appear in Online Appendix Table A2, where we predict evaluations of the hypothetical individual (range: -3 to 3) using the voting behavior treatment indicators as well as indicators for each of the other randomly assigned pieces of information included in the description of the individual. We summarize the results of the experiments from each study in Figure 1. The bars correspond to the change in social evaluations relative to the excluded treatment category; error bars indicate the 95% confidence interval for each estimate.<sup>6</sup> In this section we denote estimates from Study 1 with “S1” and estimates from Study 2 with “S2.”

In Panels A and B of Figure 1, the estimates are relative to the condition where the target was described as never voting regardless of the likelihood of their vote proving pivotal. The results of the *Battleground Status* experiment, displayed in Panel A, show that in each survey respondents penalized others for failing to vote, even if that lack of participation was unlikely to affect the outcome of the presidential election. When the target was described as voting only when the state was likely to determine the election outcome, they were evaluated only modestly more favorably than when they were presented as never voting (effect sizes: S1 = .34; S2 = .41). By comparison, an individual described as always voting was evaluated 1.18 (S1) and 1.17 (S2) units more favorably than someone who never votes. In each case, the magnitudes of these effects are similar to the effect of a person being described as paying their taxes on time rather than late (tests of equality of effects  $p > .10$ ).

The results of the *Election Closeness* experiment, displayed in Panel B, provide further support for the idea that social norms do not include allowances for people “rationally” sitting out uncompetitive

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<sup>6</sup> We note that, although the point estimates associated with the treatments vary across the two studies, these differences fall short of conventional thresholds of statistical significance in all cases. See Online Appendix Table A5 for models where we stack the data from the two experiments and interact the treatment indicators with an indicator for responses from Study 2.



elections. Compared to someone who never votes, a person who always votes (regardless of the closeness of the election) was evaluated .93 (S1) and .87 (S2) units more favorably ( $p < .01$ ). As with the *Battleground Status* experiment, the rewards associated with voting regardless of conditions are comparable to those associated with behaving in other socially desirable ways, including paying ones taxes on time, rather than late, or recycling, rather than not recycling ( $p > .10$  for each comparison of effect sizes). Someone who votes only when the election is expected to be close was evaluated almost identically to someone who never votes at all in Study 1 ( $p = .921$ ) and only somewhat more favorably in Study 2 (effect size = 0.320;  $p < .01$ ). Thus, people expect voting to yield substantial social rewards, but those rewards are substantially diminished if one only votes when an election is expected to be close.

Finally, in Panel C we summarize the results of the *Peer Behavior* experiment. Here the baseline category is “don’t vote even when most of the people they know are going to vote.” A person who doesn’t vote when others are also not going to vote is evaluated in a similar manner (effect sizes:  $S1 = -.09$ ;  $S2 = .01$ ;  $p > .10$ ). However, the act of voting is differentially rewarded depending on whether one’s peers are also voting. Specifically, voting only when others are also likely to vote is associated with a .41 unit more favorable evaluation ( $p < .05$ ) than the baseline in Study 1; in Study 2 this difference is even larger: .62 units. Voting even when others are not going to do so generates an even more positive increase in evaluation compared to the baseline, 1.04 (S1;  $p < .01$ ) and .96 (S2;  $p < .01$ ).

Putting these numbers in perspective, the results of Studies 1 and 2 suggest that somewhere between 40% and 65% (.405/1.042 and .616/.957; see Table A2, columns [5] and [6] for coefficients) of the social rewards associated with voting, rather than abstaining, when one’s peers are not voting can be earned by simply voting when they do. In comparison with the other two experiments, these proportional rewards for conditional participation are larger than the estimated 29% (S1) and 35% (S2) rewards for conditional participation in the *Battleground Status* experiments and the 1% (S1) and 37% (S2) rewards for conditional participation in the *Election Closeness* experiments.

## Conclusion

The findings from these experiments both provide new evidence about the nature of norms

concerning political participation and help us understand why election turnout is relatively invariant to the likelihood that an individual's vote will prove pivotal (e.g., to whether one lives in a "battleground state" in a presidential election year). The social rewards associated with participation are large and only modestly responsive to the likelihood that one's vote will prove pivotal. Given that the likelihood of one's vote proving pivotal is quite small even in the elections we think of as competitive, any difference in the instrumental returns to voting tied to competitiveness are likely dwarfed by norms of participation that grant little in the way of exceptions for "rationally" sitting out an election.

Our findings offer more support for the notion that individuals can avoid at least some of the social disapprobation associated with failing to vote by at least voting when their peers are likely to do so. We note that the results of the *Peer Behavior* experiment reveal the need for further research to understand the origin of the underlying conditions that generate variation in aggregate participation. If individuals are expected to vote when others do (see also Settle, Bond, and Levitt 2011), why do people vote much more frequently in presidential elections in the first place? Once such patterns begin, our results suggest social norms may reinforce them, but it does not explain why there are baseline differences in participation to begin with. One promising area for future research might be to examine situations where shocks to participation arise due to changes in policy or technology and measure whether norms of participation follow those initial shifts in rates of participation. More generally, we present an approach for measuring expectations about appropriate political behavior across context. These methods for measuring norms can be readily applied to other contexts and behaviors, including those outside of the United States and beyond voting (e.g., attending party meetings).

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**Acknowledgments**

This article draws material from an earlier paper (“Using Battleground States as a Natural Experiment to Test Theories of Voting”) presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto, Canada, September 3-6, 2009, on which Nicole Schwartzberg was a coauthor. We thank Jamie Carson, Steve Coate, Stefano DellaVigna, and Brian Knight for comments, as well as the anonymous reviewers and the editor for their feedback.

**Author Biographical Statements**

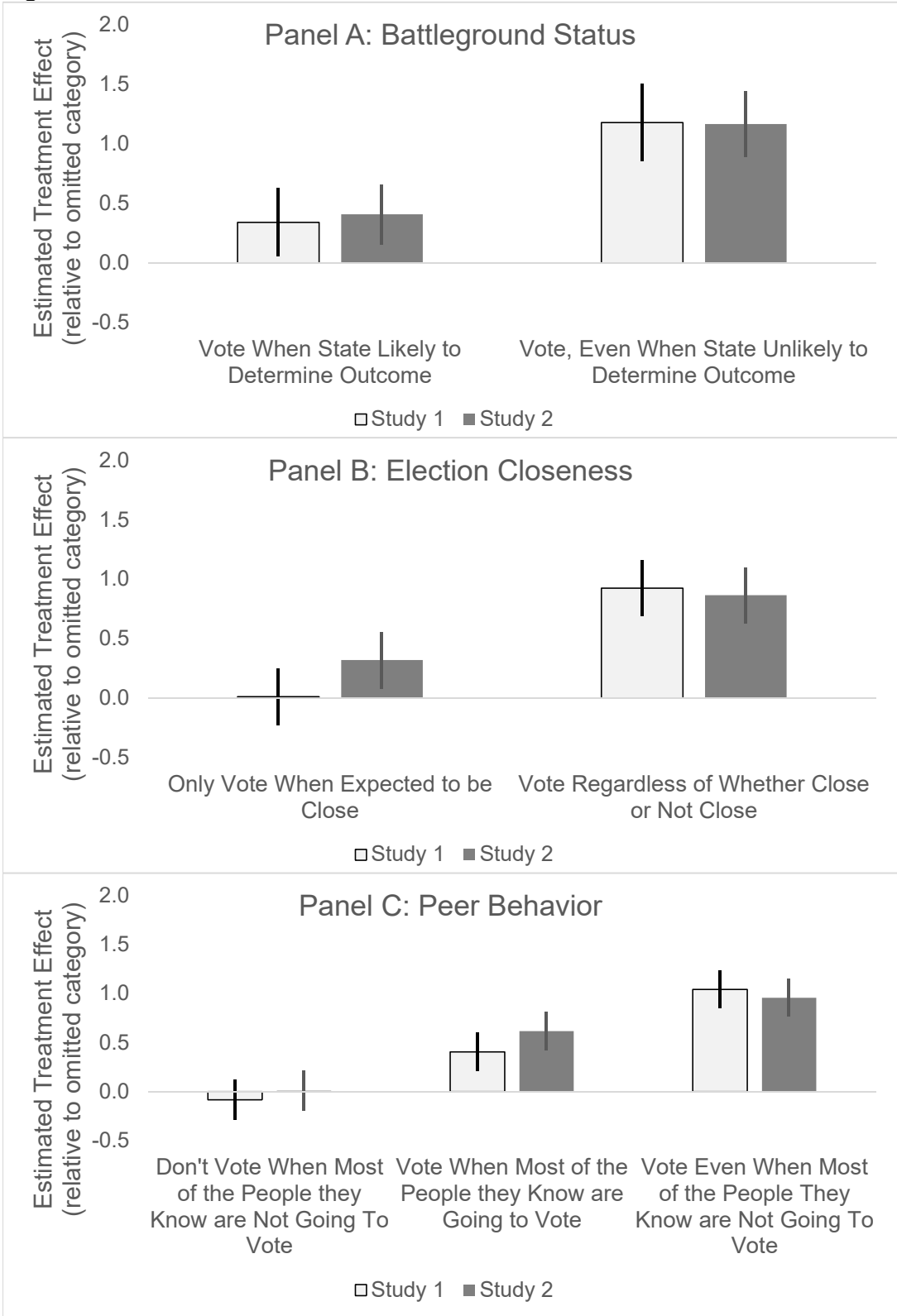
**David Doherty** is Associate Professor of Political Science at Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL 60660.

**Conor M. Dowling** is Associate Professor of Political Science at University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677.

**Alan S. Gerber** is Charles C. & Dorathea S. Dilley Professor of Political Science at Yale University, New Haven, CT 06511.

**Gregory A. Huber** is Professor of Political at Yale University, New Haven, CT 06511.

**Figure 1. Estimated Treatment Effects**



Note: Bars represent treatment effects; whiskers are 95% confidence intervals. Treatment effect estimates based on OLS regression analysis presented in Table A2 in the Online Appendix. Omitted treatment categories: Panel A, Don't Vote, Even When State Likely to Determine Outcome; Panel B, Don't Vote Whether Expected to be Close or Not; Panel C, Don't Vote Even When Most of the People they Know are Going To Vote.