

**Responsible Citizenship:
New Theory and Evidence on the Contours of the Normative Obligation to Vote**

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ABSTRACT: The social norm that citizens are expected to vote appears to play a central role in driving participation. However, a general norm that people are supposed to vote in elections cannot explain why some people fail to participate or why rates of participation vary sharply across elections. We offer a theory of “responsible citizenship” that consists of three elements that predict variation in norms and find empirical support in surveys and survey experiments for each: (1) There is a normative value to voting, unless the vote you cast is capricious or random; (2) The normative value of voting is increasing in your level of relevant information; (3) Excuses for failing to participate are more acceptable in electoral contexts where it is harder to become informed. Our findings provide guidance for future research on understanding voter participation as well as on political norms more generally.

An enduring topic of research in American political behavior concerns why some people vote but not others, as well as how people decide in which elections to participate. The most well-known formal representation of the turnout calculus is vote if and only if $p*B - C + D > 0$ (Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). However, it has been long noted that variation in turnout is not satisfactorily explained by variation in the combination of the chances one's vote decides the election result (p) and the perceived benefits between the candidates running for election (B). This led early on to the observation that, assuming voting entails some net costs ($p*B - C < 0$), norms, such as civic duty (D), must at least partially explain the decision to vote (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Indeed, extensive observational and experimental evidence is consistent with the notion that norms are important for explaining turnout behavior (e.g., Blais 2000; DellaVigna et al. 2016). Most people agree that voting is an important social obligation (Dalton 2008), but it is notable that most research does not interrogate the structure of this norm.

Better understanding the structure of the norm to vote is of central importance because although positing a high value for D will produce a prediction of voter turnout, a constant, additive D term is not a satisfactory theory. That approach cannot explain variation within an individual across types of elections (e.g., primary to general or across levels of office) or electoral context (e.g., competitiveness), nor can it explain variation within a specific electoral context across individuals. Instead, a theory of “ D ” that allows it to vary is required in order to explain why so many eligible voters stay home even in the most salient races and why turnout varies across election types. To avoid tautology, any such theory also must go beyond “the norm to vote is bigger in more important elections” because that fails to explain variation in turnout across individuals and risks the outcome (voting) explaining itself.

Thus, a theory of the structure of norm-based returns to voting is needed. Drawing from work in normative theory and elsewhere, we specify a succinct model of a set of norms, which we label “responsible citizenship,” that produces variation in D .¹ The key idea is that participation in elections are a means for citizens to sensibly choose officeholders, which requires attention to and knowledge of what choices on the ballot mean (e.g., Brennan 2012). Our theory generates three empirically testable elements, confirmation of which provides initial support for this theoretical argument as useful in explaining variation in turnout. Below, we present our theory of “responsible citizenship” and present empirical evidence—from both surveys and survey experiments—to assess this model.

Social Norms and a Theory of Responsible Citizenship

Political theorists and ethnographic accounts of individuals’ understanding of their role as citizens indicate that the mere act of voting may not be enough to satisfy one’s obligations to society (e.g., Brennan 2012). The American Founders spoke of the need for citizens to be informed to effectively participate in democracy (Mattson 1998), while scholars of deliberation similarly describe a process of citizen engagement that clearly extends beyond merely “showing

¹ Our argument is not the only explanation for turnout across election types. For instance “ethical voting” models provide a related theoretical account of the turnout decision. Our approach differs from most of those models (e.g., Coate and Conlin 2004) in that they typically focus on a group’s collective interest and link turnout to a group’s interest in affecting the election outcome—that is, those models generate a larger $p*B$ term than could be achieved with individually myopic voters, whereas we focus on variation in D .

up.” Despite the many reasons to believe that norms of participation are conditional, however, we are unaware of any prior work that provides a theory of D that varies across both context and individuals and also directly measures the circumstances that affect whether participation is perceived as socially desirable.

Social Norms Explain Participation, But What Are Those Norms?

Scholars across the social sciences have long recognized the importance of norms in explaining a vast array of human behaviors (e.g., Sherif 1936). Social norms provide “shortcuts” for how ethical obligations shape desired behaviors and in doing so solve coordination dilemmas. The language of norms connects ethically desirable behavior—that which derives from normative principles—with socially prescribed behavior—that which one is expected to do (Bicchieri 2006).

Focusing on norms about political participation, early research on voting behavior recognized the key importance of peer expectations in understanding participation (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). Some individuals felt external social pressure to conform to a particular norm—voting—and that norm was recognized to have become internalized through the process of political socialization.² Contemporary work finds a robust correlation between an individual’s peers’ participation behavior and their own (Rolfe 2012; Sinclair 2012), as well as a correlation between expressed norms of social disapprobation for failing to vote and average turnout levels (Abrams, Iversen, and Soskice 2010; Gerber et al. 2016). In addition, randomized field experiments show that increasing the threat of social sanctions for failing to vote by

² The relative importance of internalized versus socially-induced norms, as well as how norms become internalized, is an area of ongoing research (e.g., Blais 2000; Dalton 2008; Rolfe 2012).

threatening to reveal one's behavior is effective at increasing participation (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008).

In parallel with these behavioral developments, theoretical research in political science and economics on “the calculus of voting” focused on understanding the decision to vote as a function of the fixed costs of voting compared to the instrumental returns of affecting the election outcome (Downs 1957). As was recognized at the time, absent some other instrumental return to voting (e.g., shaping the margin of victory) or mistaken beliefs about election closeness, it was difficult to explain why voting was ubiquitous given these instrumental factors, particularly in large electorates. Thus, early rational choice theorists suggested that “civic duty” might explain participation, but the civic duty explanation was both a victory and a curse, because it provided little reason for observed variation in turnout across elections. As Green and Shapiro note, “the notion that civic duty shapes voter participation raises more empirical questions than it solves. ...[I]t is unclear why civic duty should fluctuate from one sort of election to another...” (1994, 52). It is striking that more than twenty years later, this observation remains true: it is unclear why patterns of voting should vary substantially across individuals and elections if people view voting as a universal norm.

In sum, a robust body of empirical evidence links social and internalized norms to participation. But, despite this rich empirical result, the full structure of those norms remains unexplored. In particular, little systematic consideration has been given to the possibility that, like other norms, the social obligation to vote may be conditional. For example, despite widespread agreement with the norm “thou shall not kill,” many individuals say they would kill to save others (Thomson 1985). Given that even seemingly incontrovertible norms are not understood to apply in all situations, it seems likely the “norm of voting” is conditional as well.

A Theory of Responsible Citizenship

Our theory of responsible citizenship is straightforward. The key idea is that participation in elections is a means for citizens to choose politicians, which requires knowledge of what choices on the ballot mean (e.g., Brennan 2012). Specifically, the theory consists of three elements.

1. There is a normative value to voting, unless the vote you cast is capricious or random.
2. The normative value of voting is increasing in your level of relevant information.
3. In elections where it is harder to become informed, excuses for failing to participate are more acceptable.

It is important to note that in these three elements there is no *direct* assumption that the normative value of voting in, say, presidential elections, is higher than voting in midterm elections. Rather, if people are more likely to draw a negative inference about someone who says they “don’t care” who the president of the United States is as opposed to their member of the House, then we would predict that there is more normative support for voting in presidential elections because there is a greater value placed on being informed about presidential elections and therefore a greater value to (informed) voting in this election. In other words, from the three stated norms we derive the prediction that presidential election turnout is higher because citizens place a higher *normative* value on voting in presidential elections.

Empirical Evidence on the Contours of the Normative Obligation to Vote

In this section, we present empirical tests of the three elements of the responsible citizenship model. All three sets of results build on a common core of using survey and survey-experimental evidence to measure the contours of the normative obligation to vote.

Some Forms of Voting are More Socially Desirable than Others

The first element of the theory predicts that when voting is random or capricious it will not be socially rewarded. For evidence on this point, we draw from team content items from the 2009 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) as well as a novel ranking item administered to a convenience sample to address the question of whether all forms of ill-informed voting are viewed as equally socially unacceptable.³

In the 2009 CCES we included a series of vignettes in which we described a single characteristic of a hypothetical individual (“Suppose you just met [someone / a different person] and learned the following information about them: they [treatment].”) and asked the respondent to evaluate that person using three items drawn from a battery often used to measure broad social evaluations (see Graziano et al. 2007; “My overall impression of this person is positive”; “I think this person is responsible”; and “I respect this person”). Our outcome of interest is the average response across the three items, a scale running from -3 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree).

About one-third of respondents were randomly assigned to a vignette where the treatment described the target individual as voting by casting arbitrary votes (“vote by selecting the first candidate listed on the ballot”) or well informed policy-based ballots (“vote by selecting the candidate whose policies they agree with most”).⁴ All respondents then saw one vignette about presidential election turnout (randomly assigned to “always vote” or “usually vote” or “never

³ All technical details about sample construction and data analysis, as well as question wording for all surveys, appear in the Supporting Information (SI).

⁴ The remaining respondents were assigned to treatments unrelated to voting behavior.

vote” in presidential elections). Figure 1 displays average evaluations with 95% confidence intervals for these five behaviors.

{Figure 1 about here}

Individuals who always vote receive an average rating of 1.13, which is 1.73 units larger than the -0.60 evaluation of individuals who never vote ($p < .01$ for test of difference of means). More informative for the theory of responsible citizenship, however, is the effect of how people vote when they turn out. Casting an informed ballot is viewed more favorably than any of the other behaviors with a mean rating of 1.44 ($p < .05$ for comparison to always voting). By contrast, simply voting for the first candidate on the ballot yields an average rating of -1.32, *which is worse than just staying home* (difference = .83, $p < .01$). Thus, voting capriciously entails a social cost that is larger than abstaining.

Our second analysis on this point draws from a survey item fielded using a convenience sample of US residents recruited through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) interface. The item asked respondents to rank from most to least desirable how a voter should behave when she encounters a race in which she knows “very little about the policy positions of the candidates”. This question is designed to allow us to understand the social desirability of different ways of deciding how, and whether, to vote when one is ill-informed.

{Figure 2 about here}

Figure 2 displays the proportion of respondents ranking each of the five options as most desirable (with 95% confidence intervals). The option ranked first by the most respondents (42%) when facing a choice that they know little about was skipping the race. Relying on party cues and voting for the candidate who was most successful prior to entering politics were seen as most desirable by 38% and 18% of respondents, respectively. Very few respondents ranked

voting on the basis of a familiar name (1%) or whether a candidate is first on the ballot (<1%) as the most desirable strategy.

The Social Benefits of Voting are Larger for Informed Voters

The results presented above are consistent with the first element of the responsible citizenship theory—the simple act of voting is not necessarily enough to garner social rewards. The second element of our theory, however, predicts that the social rewards to voting are also increasing with citizen information. Standard survey items point to a widespread expectation that those who vote can expect to be evaluated more positively than those who do not vote.⁵ Left unstated in such questions, however, is whether the citizen who votes must do so in an informed manner. In light of this ambiguity, we directly measure the relative social returns to informed and ill-informed voting.

On the 2009 CCES we also included a factorial survey vignette that described a hypothetical individual as follows:

They [stay informed about current events/do not stay informed about current events], [always vote in presidential elections/usually vote in presidential elections/never vote in presidential elections/(blank)] and [recycle/do not recycle].

The three manipulations in brackets were independently randomized. After respondents were presented with this description, they were asked to evaluate the person using the same three-item battery of questions used in the prior vignette experiment.

We test whether the social returns to voting vary by whether the individual described is positioned to cast an informed ballot by estimating an OLS regression model predicting the

⁵ For example, in the 2000 Annenberg National Election Survey 45% of respondents agreed, “If I do not vote, my family and friends are disappointed in me.”

social evaluations scale using indicators for each manipulation as well as the interactions between being informed and the voting indicators. We calculate the social rewards to voting, (the difference in evaluations when an individual always rather than never votes) by whether the individual stays informed.

{Figure 3 about here}

Results of this analysis are displayed graphically in Figure 3. (The underlying regression model results appear in SI Table S2.) Per the figure, an informed individual who always rather than never votes is evaluated 1.60 units more favorably ($p < .01$), which is a shift of more than one-quarter of the range of the evaluations scale. By contrast, when the individual is described as not being informed, turning out always rather than never generates a much smaller .71 unit increase in evaluations ($p < .01$). The difference in these differences is .89 units ($p < .01$), indicating that the social returns associated with turnout are nearly twice as large when one is described as being informed rather than ill-informed.

Excuses for Staying Home More Acceptable in Elections Where It Is Harder To Be Informed

Thus far we have provided evidence that the social returns to voting are weaker when a voter is ill-informed and that ill-informed voting may yield a social penalty compared to simply staying home. But for these factors to explain variation in turnout across election types, it must be the case that citizens believe that not voting because one is ill-informed avoids that social disapprobation and that the acceptability of that excuse (and the difficulty of obtaining information necessary to become informed) are greater for elections where turnout is lower.

In this section, we present two pieces of evidence regarding how individuals' self-assessed ability to cast an informed ballot and their perceptions regarding voting-related norms vary across election types. First, we show that people report having more difficulty deciding who

to vote for in elections that tend to feature low turnout. Second, we show that people believe their peers find excuses for not voting—including the excuse of not knowing who to support—to be more acceptable in these elections.

Our data come from questions included on an original national survey of 2,000 individuals who voted in either the 2010 or 2012 general elections. The survey was fielded by YouGov/Polimetrix in 2014. We asked each respondent how much they agreed that “It is easy for me to figure out which candidate to vote for” with four response options (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree). Because almost no respondents somewhat or strongly disagree, we present the proportion strongly agreeing with each statement in the first row of Table 1. Forty-five percent of respondents strongly agree that it is easy to know who to vote for in a presidential election, a figure that drops by 5 percentage points in House elections ($p < .01$) and by 4 more percentage points to 36% in House primary elections ($p < .01$); the 4 percentage point difference between House and House primary elections is also statistically significant ($p < .05$). In short, citizens report having greater difficulty deciding which candidate to vote for in exactly those elections that tend to feature low turnout.

{Table 1 about here}

But do people expect to be excused for failing to participate in these elections where they find it more difficult to make a decision? A battery of questions included on the survey asked about the acceptability of excuses for not voting. The question prompt was “Suppose you didn’t vote in a [presidential election/election for the US House/primary election for the US House]. For each of the excuses below, what sort of reaction would you expect from your family and friends?” Four excuses, included in the bottom half of Table 1, were asked for each election type. For example, one excuse was “I didn’t know enough about which candidate to vote for, so I

stayed home.” For each election type, individuals could rate this excuse as acceptable (very/somewhat) or unacceptable (very/somewhat).

We present the proportion believing each excuse would be acceptable for each election type in the bottom half of Table 1. The table shows that while 26% of respondents believe the “I didn’t know enough” excuse would be acceptable in a presidential election, this figure grows to 30% in a House election ($p < .05$) and 34% in a House primary ($p < .01$); the 4 percentage point difference between House and House primary elections is also statistically significant ($p < .05$). Thus, saying one does not know enough to vote is a more acceptable excuse in precisely those elections where voter information levels tend to be low. Moreover, the other three excuses exhibit a similar pattern of response, suggesting that people broadly view excuses for non-participation as more acceptable in elections where voters tend to know less.

Overall, these data show that individuals believe they can more readily avoid the social sanctions associated with failing to vote by admitting to being uninformed in a House primary compared to a presidential or House election, and also recognize that they have the hardest time figuring out which candidate to vote for in primary elections. These results provide additional evidence that voting norms are calibrated to electoral- and individual-level context in ways that correlate with observed patterns of participation.

Discussion

The idea that social norms play a central role in shaping human behavior is not new, nor is the narrower idea that such norms affect patterns of political participation. However, a general norm that people are supposed to vote in elections cannot explain why some people fail to participate or why rates of participation vary sharply across elections. We offer a theory of

responsible citizenship consisting of three elements concerning variation in norms (D), and find empirical support for each.

Consistent with the first element of the theory—that the simple act of voting is not necessarily enough to garner social rewards—we find that (1) the rewards associated with voting (rather than not voting) are significantly larger if an individual is informed about political matters (Figure 1) and (2) a plurality of respondents viewed abstaining from voting as more desirable than voting on the basis of arbitrary ballot order or name recognition, or even commonly accepted “shortcuts” like party identification, when one does not have much information about the candidates in question (Figure 2). Consistent with the second element of the theory we find that the social returns to voting are indeed weaker when a voter is ill-informed than when she is well-informed (Figure 3). Finally, we find that people expect excuses for not voting to be most acceptable in electoral contexts where they report having difficulty making informed vote choices—elections that tend to feature low turnout rates (Table 1).

Our findings also provide guidance for future research on understanding voter participation as well as on political norms more generally. Regarding the former, an important follow on question is about *when* citizens believe they meet the standard of being informed “enough” to cast a ballot that will be socially rewarded. Regarding the broader importance of political norms, there are many other important contexts in which norms are believed to shape our choices. For example, political conversations are shaped by expectations about when certain topics are acceptable, whether direct disagreement and incivility are tolerable, and whether the expression of certain views is acceptable. At present, some of these topics have attracted research (e.g., Mutz 2006), but to understand important classes of behavior like elite and private political discourse it would be desirable to similarly understand how individuals perceive their normative

obligations (see, e.g., Dalton 2008) and how those obligations vary by context. Additionally, as with other research on norms, it remains an exciting and important area of research to understand how norms emerge, become engrained, and are sustained (Ellickson 1991). In all of this research, however, our work suggests a key path forward: improving our understanding of the contours of norms that are likely to matter for understanding differences in behavior across individuals and contexts.

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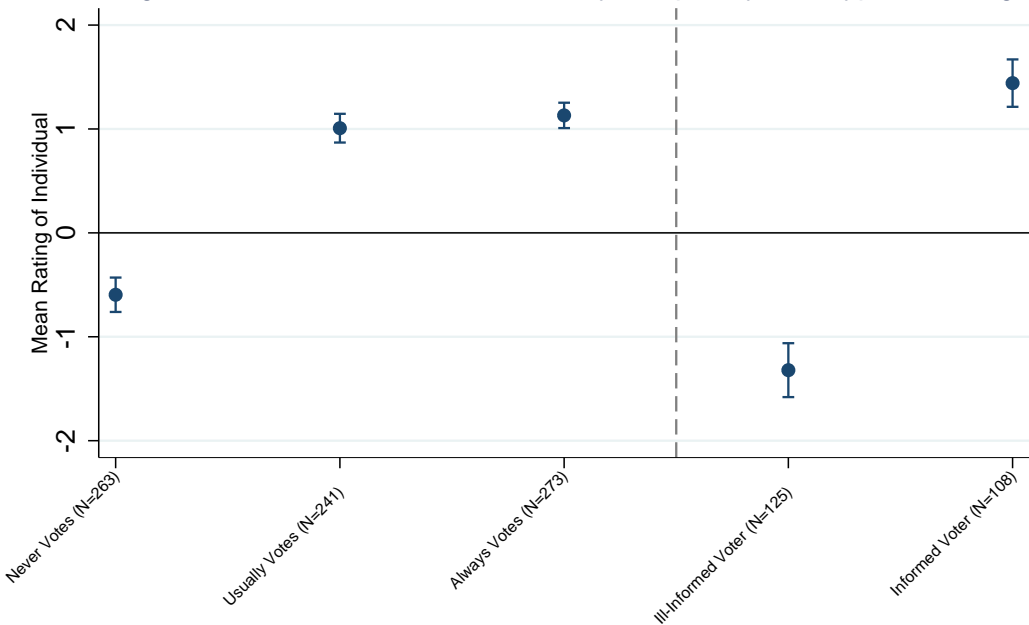
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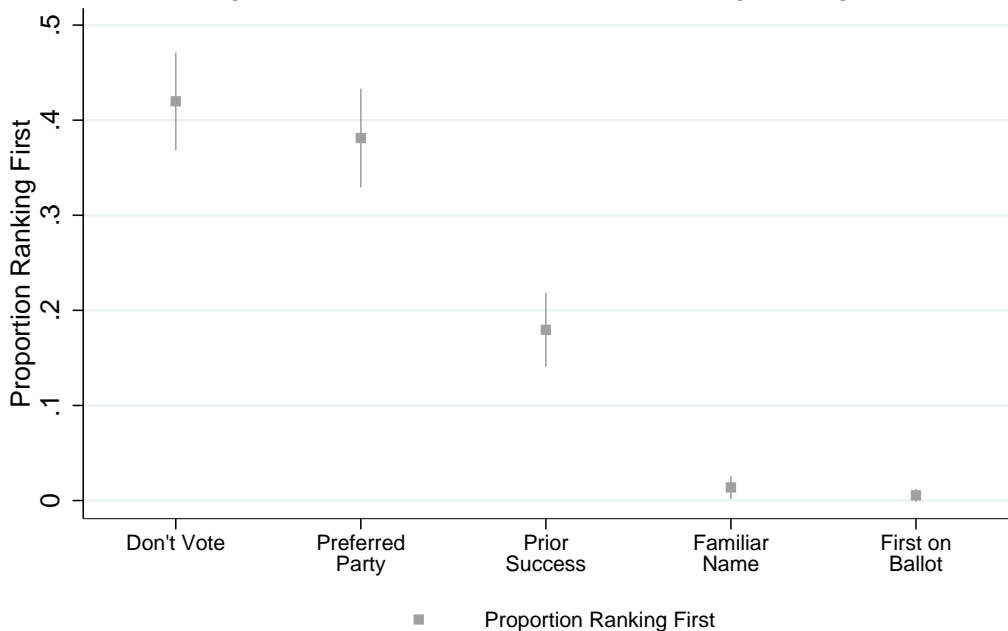
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Figure 1: Evaluations of Individuals By Frequency and Type of Voting



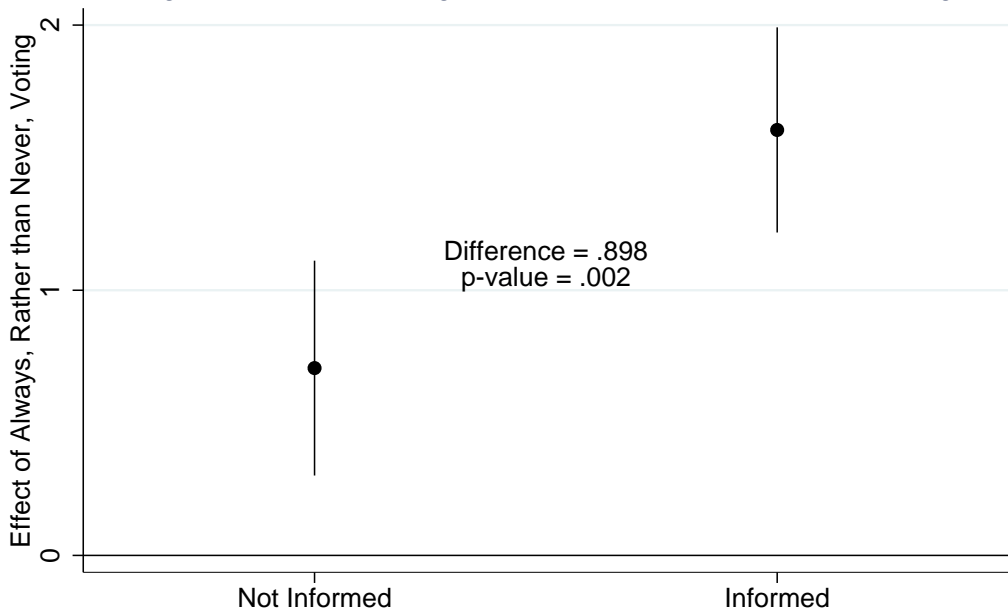
Note: Outcome is mean on evaluation scale, which ranges from -3 to 3, with 95% confidence intervals. Figure depicts results from two separate experiments, separated by the dashed gray line.

Figure 2: Evaluation of Uninformed Voting Strategies



Note: Respondents ranked all options from 1 to 5, 1=best.

Figure 3: Effect of Being Informed on Social Rewards to Voting



Note: Outcome is difference in evaluation scale, which ranges from -3 to 3. Left plot is for individual described as not staying informed about current events, right plot is for informed.

Table 1. Electoral Contexts Where Becoming Informed Is More Difficult Associated with Greater Perceived Acceptability of Excuses for Not Voting

Proportion Strongly Agreeing, Easy to Figure Out Which Candidate to Vote For in...				
	Presidential Election	House Election	House Primary Election	Difference (Presidential Versus House Primary)
Easy to figure out which candidate to vote for ¹	0.45	0.40	0.36	-0.09 (-20%)*
Proportion Finding Excuse (Very/Somewhat) Acceptable for Not Voting in...				
	Presidential Election	House Election	House Primary Election	Difference (Presidential Versus House Primary)
I didn't know enough about the candidates ²	0.26	0.30	0.34	.08 (+31%)*
Moved, so wasn't aware of everything in the election	0.32	0.38	0.40	.08 (+25%)*
Didn't think it would matter who won	0.16	0.20	0.23	.07 (+44%)*
Didn't realize it was Election Day	0.17	0.21	0.22	.05 (+29%)*

Note: N=1987; weighted analysis of 2014 YouGov/Polimetrix survey. * Statistically significant difference, $p < .01$

1 Question wording: "It is easy for me to figure out which candidate to vote for in a(n) [presidential election/election for the US House/primary election for the US House]" (Response options: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree.)

2 Question wording: "Suppose you didn't vote in a(n) [presidential election/election for the US House/primary election for the US House]. For each of the excuses below, what sort of reaction would you expect from your family and friends?" Excuses: "I didn't know enough about which candidate to vote for, so I stayed home." "I recently moved, and so I wasn't aware of everything going on in the election." "I didn't think it would matter who would win." "I didn't realize it was Election Day, so I missed my chance to vote." (Response options: very acceptable, somewhat acceptable, somewhat unacceptable, or very unacceptable.)

Supporting Information for

“Responsible Citizenship: New Theory and Evidence on the Contours of the Normative Obligation to Vote”

Section 1. Technical Details about Sample Construction

Section 2. Question Wording

Section 3. Additional References

Section 4. Supplementary Tables

- Table S1. Summary Statistics for Survey Samples
- Table S2. The Social Returns to Voting are Larger for Informed Voting (Factorial Survey Vignette Results)

Section 1. Technical Details about Sample Construction

1. 2009 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES)

The CCES, which is administered by YouGov/Polimetrix, is an opt-in Internet-based survey that uses a combination of sampling and matching techniques to account for the fact that opt-in Internet survey respondents may differ from the general population on factors such as political interest. For more detailed information on the CCES, see Vavreck and Rivers (2008).

Characteristics of this sample are reported in column (1) of Table S1.

2. 2010 Mechanical Turk (MTurk)

Although this is a convenience sample, the MTurk population appears more representative of the larger US population than student samples and has become a common source of study recruits in social science research (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling 2007; Paolacci, Chandler, and Ipeirotis 2010). For a more detailed discussion of the pros and cons of using this subject pool for research purposes, particularly in social science research, see, among others: Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012); Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling (2007); Huff and Tingley (2015); Krupnikov and Levine (2014); Mullinix et al. (2015); and Weinberg, Freese, and McElhattan (2014).

Characteristics of this sample are reported in column (2) of Table S1.

The survey was fielded from 12/15/2010 to 12/17/2010. Respondents were paid \$0.50 to participate. The text of the Mechanical Turk request read: “This survey will ask you a series of questions about you and your feelings about current events and politics. The survey is here: [URL]. Once you finish the survey you will be provided with a code. To get paid, please enter the code below and click "Submit". DO NOT CLOSE THIS WINDOW WHILE YOU ARE TAKING THE SURVEY. Payment is auto-approved in 5 days.”

3. 2014 YouGov/Polimetrix

For reasons unrelated to the present project, this sample was stratified to ensure that 25% of respondents had voted in the congressional primary elections in either 2010 or 2012. Our analysis presents results weighted to reflect a nationally representative sample. The results are substantively unchanged using the unweighted data.

Characteristics of this sample are reported in column (3) of Table S1.

Section 2. Question Wording

1. 2009 CCES

Social Returns – Single Item 1 (reported in Figure 1)

Special Instructions: For this item and the next (similar) item, please randomize which treatment phrase is used without replacement (i.e., the respondent should not get the same phrase in this item and the next). The phrases are:

vote by selecting the first candidate listed on the ballot
vote by selecting the candidate whose policies they agree with most
stay informed about current events
do not stay informed about current events
volunteer in their community
do not volunteer in their community
return their library books on time
return their library books late
pay their taxes on time
pay their taxes late
recycle
do not recycle
have a college degree
have a high school diploma

Suppose you just met someone and learned the following information about them: they [*phrase*].

To what extent would you agree with each of the following statements?

Columns: Strongly agree; Agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

Rows: My overall impression of this person is positive; I think this person is responsible; I respect this person.

Social Returns – Single Item 2 (reported in Figure 1)

Suppose you just met a **different** person and learned the following information about them: they [*phrase*].

To what extent would you agree with each of the following statements?

{same response options as above}

Social Returns – Turnout Single Item

Special Instructions: Please randomize (33/33/33) whether the person “always”, “usually” or “never” votes in presidential elections.

Suppose you just met a **different** person and learned the following information about them: they [always/usually/never] vote in presidential elections.

To what extent would you agree with each of the following statements?

{same response options as above}

Social Returns to Turnout – Factorial Vignette¹ (reported in Figure 3)

Special Instructions: Three components of the vignette need to be randomized. Please: randomize (1/4 probability) whether the respondent is told the person “always vote in presidential elections”, “usually vote in presidential elections”, “never vote in presidential elections”, or nothing (i.e., left blank); randomize (50/50 probability) whether the respondent is told the person “stay informed about current events” or “do not stay informed about current events”; randomize (50/50 probability) whether the respondent is told the person “recycle” or “does not recycle”. Thus, there are 16 possible variations. Also, please randomize the order of the components listed as attributes of the person.

[Suppose you just met someone/ Now imagine you met a different person] and learned the following information about them: They [stay informed about current events/do not stay informed about current events][, always vote in presidential elections/, usually vote in presidential elections/, never vote in presidential elections/(blank)] and [recycle / do not recycle].

To what extent would you agree with each of the following statements?

{same response options as above}

2. 2010 MTurk

Ranking Item (reported in Figure 2)

Suppose someone goes to vote on Election Day and encounters a race in which they know very little about the policy positions of the candidates on the ballot. What should they do?

Please rank the following options from the one you think is best (1 - top) to the one you think is worst (5 - bottom).

- Do not vote on that race (skip it)
- Vote for the candidate listed first on the ballot
- Vote for the candidate from their preferred party
- Vote for the candidate whose name sounds most familiar
- Vote for the candidate who, before entering politics, was most successful in their previous line of work

¹ This factorial vignette was presented prior to the single item vignettes listed above, with some unrelated survey content in-between. In addition, this was one of four factorial vignettes respondents viewed. The order of these four factorial vignettes was randomized.

3. 2014 YouGov/Polimetrix

Difficult to figure out which candidate to vote for (reported in Table 1)

There are many elections in the United States, ranging from elections for local office to presidential elections. Additionally, there are primary elections, in which parties select their candidates for the general election, and general elections, in which candidates from the two main parties and certain others compete for office. We'd like to ask you your views about some of these different types of elections. Please tell us how much you agree with each of the following statements. [ALL RESPONDENTS WERE ASKED ABOUT EACH ELECTION TYPE]

It is easy for me to figure out which candidate to vote for in a(n) [presidential election/election for the US House/primary election for the US House].

Response options: strongly agree; somewhat agree; somewhat disagree; strongly disagree.

Excuses for not voting (reported in Table 1)

Suppose you didn't vote in a(n) [presidential election/election for the US House/primary election for the US House]. For each of the excuses below, what sort of reaction would you expect from your family and friends?"

Excuses:

- I didn't know enough about which candidate to vote for, so I stayed home.
- I recently moved, and so I wasn't aware of everything going on in the election.
- I didn't think it would matter who would win.
- I didn't realize it was Election Day, so I missed my chance to vote.

Response options: very acceptable; somewhat acceptable; somewhat unacceptable; very unacceptable.

Section 3. Additional References

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Table S1. Summary Statistics for Survey Samples

Variable	2009 CCES	2010 Mturk	2014 YouGov/Polimetrix
White = 1	0.7452 [.436]	0.8398 [.3673]	0.7415 [.4379]
Black = 1	0.1121 [.3157]	0.0663 [.2491]	0.1178 [.3225]
Hispanic = 1	0.0904 [.287]	0.0359 [.1863]	0.0814 [.2736]
Other race=1	0.0522 [.2226]	0.0939 [.2921]	0.0592 [.2361]
Age (in years)	49.386 [15.7063]	34.8249 [12.6165]	50.9526 [16.6622]
Female=1	0.521 [.4999]	0.6067 [.4892]	0.5466 [.4979]
Education (1=No HS; 6=post-grad)	3.2471 [1.4428]	4.0552 [1.3612]	3.4744 [1.4433]
Income (1=<\$10k; 14=>150k; 15=RF)	8.2688 [3.822]		7.1582 [4.2324]
Income Missing	0.0828 [.2758]		0.1272 [.3333]
Party ID (-3=S. Dem; 3=S. Rep)	-0.2229 [2.1847]	-0.4834 [1.9738]	
Ideology (-2=V. Lib; 2=V. Cons)	0.214 [.9949]		0.1376 [.9661]
Religious Attendance (1 never; 6 more than 1/week)	3.1449 [1.6796]		
Political Interest (1 hardly at all; 4 most of the time)	3.4725 [.7931]		3.3888 [.8367]
Trust Government? (0=never; 3=always)	0.8474 [.6634]		
Observations	785	362	1999

Note: Cell entries are means with standard deviations in brackets. For the 2009 CCES and 2014 YouGov/Polimetrix samples the means are weighted.

Table S2. The Social Returns to Voting are Larger for Informed Voting (Factorial Survey Vignette Results)

	Evaluation (-3 to 3)
Current Events (1=Stays informed; 0=Does not stay informed) x Vote (Always)	0.325 [0.256]
Current Events x Vote (Usually)	0.113 [0.258]
Current Events x Vote (Never)	-0.573 [0.296]
Current Events (1=Stays informed; 0=Does not stay informed)	1.145 [0.190]**
Recycles (1=yes; 0=no)	0.708 [0.096]**
Vote (1=Always)	0.015 [0.195]
Vote (1=Never)	-0.692 [0.210]**
Vote (1=Usually)	0.124 [0.190]
Constant	-0.503 [0.149]**
Observations	780
R-squared	0.284
Joint significance of interactions (p-value)	0.017

Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in brackets. The excluded category for the voting behavior treatments is the condition where no information about the target's voting behavior was presented. * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%