

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND VOTER PARTICIPATION:

EVIDENCE FROM THE 1991 NES PILOT STUDY

Stephen Knack
George Mason University
Center for Study of Public Choice

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I. Introduction

"External" sanctions from friends, relatives, and other associates appear to play a major role in overcoming many types of collective action problems (see Olson, 1965). In contrast to internalized restraints, which involve "processes of conscience or superego, the pain of guilt feelings, and the fear of supernatural sanctions," social sanctions include "face-to-face approval and disapproval, ostracism, conformity pressure, shame and pride" (Campbell, 1982, 434). While internal sanctions such as guilt requires only one's own knowledge of one's behavior, external sanctions require knowledge by others of one's behavior.

Voter turnout can be viewed as a collective action problem in which attainment of a socially efficient outcome requires strong social norms, to overcome the free rider incentives facing individuals. The importance of internal sanctions in the context of voting has long been recognized; the American National Elections Studies contained four civic-duty-to-vote items until 1980 (after which 3 of the items were dropped). However, the role of interpersonal pressures to vote has received little attention in the theoretical literature on turnout, and virtually none in the empirical literature. While perhaps of less importance than internal sanctions in the context of voting--due in part to difficulties in monitoring--anecdotal and polling evidence provides some indication that interpersonal pressures to vote are worthy of further investigation. If the fear of shame and ostracism can induce soldiers to fight in battles (Keegan,

1976), surely it can be strong enough to induce them to vote. In an ABC-Harvard poll conducted in 1983 (Alderman, 1983), 37 percent of respondents--including 41 percent of regular voters--cited as a reason for voting the statement: "My friends and relatives almost always vote and I'd feel uncomfortable telling them I hadn't voted."

Previous models of interpersonal pressures to vote (Uhlener, 1989; Schram, 1989; Coleman, 1990) are based on group or partisan norms. High turnout among group members benefits them by helping to elect the group's favored candidates; social pressures arise to limit free rider behavior harmful to the group.

Social pressures may also be derived from civic duty. In the contemporary United States, a sense of civic duty based on affiliation with the society as a whole appears to be the key variable accounting for the participation of the many citizens without strong or exclusive loyalties to politically active interest groups, reference groups, or parties (Knack, 1992). Voting participation is not only a partisan or group public good; it is also widely perceived as a societal or national public good: sufficiently low turnouts "can conceivably cause democracy to break down" (Downs, 1957, p. 268) as highly unpopular candidates could be elected.

Persons with particularly intense feelings of loyalty and obligation to society, or who are especially well-socialized, "enforce" voting norms through their willingness to express disapproval at non-voting. Social sanctions thus permit a

certain amount of "substitutability" of feelings of duty, as someone with a low sense of civic obligation may nonetheless vote to avoid displeasing a friend or relative with a stronger sense of duty. For the individual, then, voter participation is a function of one's own sense of duty, of the strength of duty of one's family, friends, and other associates, and of the frequency and quality of interaction with these potential enforcers. The relevance of social sanctions for an individual requires that he associates with at least some high-duty persons whose respect he values.

In addition to their implications for the relevance of social sanctions, strength of interpersonal ties may have a psychological dimension. Persons who are more connected to their fellow citizens and better-integrated into society may be more satisfied with their lives, and thus have a strong sense of civic duty, which is based on "a sense of obligation to assume the duties of citizenship in return for the benefits it bestows" (Macaluso and Wanat, 1979, p. 160).

II. Other Relevant Studies

There is very little existing evidence in the turnout literature that interpersonal ties matter. Cassel and Hill (1981, p. 193) briefly outline a "peer interaction" theory of turnout but concede that it "cannot be tested at present because relevant survey data do not exist." Pomper and Sernekos (1989) claim to show that commitment to families and communities is

correlated with turnout, but their study relies heavily on variables such as residential mobility and marital status with alternative, more traditional "cost" interpretations. Eagles and Erfle (1989) community cohesion increases turnout, with percent walking to work, and a Herfindahl index of socioeconomic homogeneity as independent variables. Their units of observation, however, are British parliamentary constituencies, averaging about 100,000 in population--surely too large to adequately represent communities, as they admit. Their two measures of community cohesion fail in a test using more appropriate units of measurement, "neighborhoods" created by grouping census tracts and voter precincts in an American city (Knack, 1990a).

Some modest evidence for the importance of interpersonal ties can be found, however, from NES surveys and from a recent, local survey conducted by the author after the 1990 elections. Married persons are almost invariably found to vote more than single, separated, or widowed persons (e.g., Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Teixeira, 1987). Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980, 44) cite marriage as "by far the most important source" of interpersonal influence on turnout decisions. There may also be economies of scale in information and transportation associated with marriage, however: "those who are married and living with their spouses can share the physical costs of voting (like registering and traveling to the polling booth), as well as the task of deciding between candidates" (Teixeira, 1987, 23).

Recent evidence contained in Knack (1992), using data from the NES and from a local survey conducted by the author following the 1990 election, indicates that the interpersonal effects of marital status rather than any cost-reducing effects are responsible for the turnout-marriage relationship.

Residential mobility has a strong effect on turnout, as the likelihood of one voting increases with length of residence at one's current address (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Mobility has been regarded as an important indicator of social connectedness (e.g., Crewe et. al., 1977; Pomper and Sernekos, 1989). It is usually interpreted as a cost variable, however (e.g., Silver, 1973; Cassel and Hill, 1981); movers must learn where and how to re-register and to vote. Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass (1987) find that the effect of mobility is not consistently and significantly lower among survey respondents residing in states allowing election-day registration, i.e., those states in which the cost effects of mobility should be lowest. This result indicates that mobility may not be solely a cost variable, but provides no direct evidence for the importance of social pressures from neighbors and neighborhood institutions to vote. Evidence from the 1980 NES Major Panel File and from a survey conducted by the author support the view that neighborhood social ties increase the probability of voting, independently of one's length of residence in the neighborhood or community (Knack, 1992).

III. Interpersonal Ties and the 1991 NES Pilot Study

The 1991 NES Pilot Study contains, for the first time in a national elections survey, several measures of strength of social ties and interpersonal pressures to vote. Questions inquired about the frequency of spending evenings socializing with friends and relatives, and the number of neighbors the respondent knows and at least occasionally talks to. A summary "social sanctions" indicator was also included, asking whether the respondent had any associates who would be disappointed upon learning that he or she had skipped voting in an election (see Appendix).

Approximately 44 percent of Pilot respondents replied affirmatively to the social sanctions measure, consistent with the results of the Harvard-ABC poll cited above, and with the 43 percent responding affirmatively to a similar question in an earlier local survey conducted by the author. The role of various types of social ties in determining one's likelihood of citing the relevance of interpersonal pressures to vote are explored in Table 1. It is found that the piloted social ties items are significant predictors of the social sanctions summary measure. However, very little of the variance in this measure is accounted for by the piloted social ties variables or by other items regularly included in the NES. Further study is clearly needed to determine the source and strength of interpersonal pressures to vote. Possible additional relevant variables, not asked in the Pilot, may include:

-Does the respondent have any adult children (and how many)?
The NES only inquires about minors. See Pomper and Sernekos

(1989) for a discussion, and recommendation of such an item.

-Does the respondent have any living siblings (and if so, how many)?

-Are the respondents parents living (one or both)?

While a limitless number of questions concerning the quantity and quality of one's personal interactions could be asked of respondents, the above three appear, from a follow-up to the social sanctions question a survey conducted by the author ("Who would be disappointed or upset?") to hold particular promise. Other possible candidates include activity in social clubs or organizations, and interaction with co-workers.

Surprisingly, the social sanctions summary indicator fails to strongly predict voter participation in the 1990 election. Among respondents with associates who disapprove of nonvoting, turnout was only 4 percentage points higher than for the remainder of the sample (48.2% versus 44.2 %). As an independent variable in a regression model, it fails to attain significance.

When the social ties items are included in a regression model, interaction with neighbors performs extremely well, with knowing 1 to 5 neighbors adding about 9 percentage points to the probability of voting, and knowing more than five associated with a 16 percentage point probability increase (Table 2). The inclusion of these "neighbors" variables increases the model's likelihood ratio index from .224 to .252. The effects of these measures are independent of the impact of residential mobility; living at one's address for no more than two years reduces the probability of voting by about 15 percentage points. The two

"social-evenings-with" variables, in contrast, perform very poorly--in contrast to their showing in the social sanctions regression--as neither coefficient has the anticipated sign. In addition to the possibility that turnout is unaffected by time spent socializing with friends and relatives, as well as by whether one's associates disapproves of nonvoting, the similarly poor results of other variables--such as registration closing date and marital status--usually found to be strongly related to turnout in NES studies, suggests that the small sample size could be a problem. Nonetheless, test results presented here argue for modifying some of the piloted social ties items, and adding others for a more complete picture of an individual's social stimulus to vote.

TABLE 1:
 Others Disappointed
 at Nonvoting
 Dependent Variable Mean = .44

Variable	Logit parameter estimate	t-ratio	OLS parameter estimate
Intercept	-3.221	-2.32	-0.186
College	0.403	1.80	0.090
Married	-0.290	1.22	-0.067
Age 51+	-0.499	-2.00	-0.108
Time w/ friends	0.185	2.24	0.039
Time w/ relatives	0.315	1.50	0.066
# Neighbors known	0.101	1.74	0.022
Work 20+ hours/wk	0.050	0.20	0.009
Log of Income	0.096	0.73	0.020
No church att.	-0.181	-0.81	-0.041
Urged to register or vote	0.840	3.87	0.191
Number of kids 10-17	0.178	1.13	0.041
N = 432 likelihood ratio index: .082			

TABLE 2:
1990 Turnout

Variable	Logit parameter estimate	t-ratio	OLS parameter estimate
Intercept	-6.066	-3.25	-0.443
College	1.101	2.76	0.192
H. S. Diploma	0.746	2.02	0.130
Homeowner	0.579	2.09	0.111
Married	0.131	0.47	0.031
Age in years	0.036	4.19	0.006
Log of Income	0.198	1.12	0.021
Work 20+ hours/wk	-0.318	-1.12	-0.053
Time w/ friends	-0.090	-1.01	-0.017
Time w/ relatives	-0.136	-0.57	-0.015
Know 1-4 neighbors	0.470	1.48	0.091
Know 5+ neighbors	0.893	2.52	0.160
Regular churchgoer	1.030	4.19	0.187
Urged to register or vote	0.625	2.48	0.115
Reside < 2 years	-0.876	-3.17	-0.150
Guber. race	0.501	1.46	0.084
Reg. closing date	0.012	0.84	0.002
Agency reg.		2.44	0.105
N = 436 likelihood ratio index: .252			

Appendix
Piloted Social Ties Items

#2838

"How often do you spend a social evening with friends? Would this be once or twice a week, several times a month, once a month, a few times a year, or less than that?" (7-point response, including volunteered responses "more than once or twice a week" and "never.")

#2839

Same as above, with "relatives" substituted for "friends." (Collapsed to 3-point response for data analysis).

#2836

"Do you have any neighbors that you know and talk to regularly?"

#2837 (follow-up)

"About how many?" Prompt: "Would that be just one, two or three, four or five, or more than five?"

#2835

"Suppose you did not vote in an election. Do you have any friends, relatives, or co-workers who would be disappointed or upset with you (because you did not vote?"

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