

Proposal: Expectations of vote share in social circles and general population

Keywords: vote expectation, social circle, social cognition, homophily, vote share predictions

Relevance and Motivation

Election polling is going through difficult times because of various societal trends, including increased use of cell phones and decline in response rates (Zukin, 2016). Various methods have been used in an attempt to improve predictions, including poll aggregates, expert judgments, and theoretical models. However, all of those methods may be outperformed by simple questions about expectations of voters themselves (Graefe, 2014; Rothschild & Wolfers, 2011). For instance, vote expectation questions, such as the one used in ANES since 1952 (“Who do you think will be elected President in November?”) have been shown to be more accurate in predicting the winner of U.S. elections than the other methods (Graefe, 2014) or at least to provide additional information beyond these methods (Graefe, 2015). We propose to augment the current vote expectation question with two additional questions: one about expected percentage of people in the general population who will vote for different candidates, and another about the expected percentages in one’s own social circle. These questions could improve election predictions and provide numerous theoretical and methodological insights.

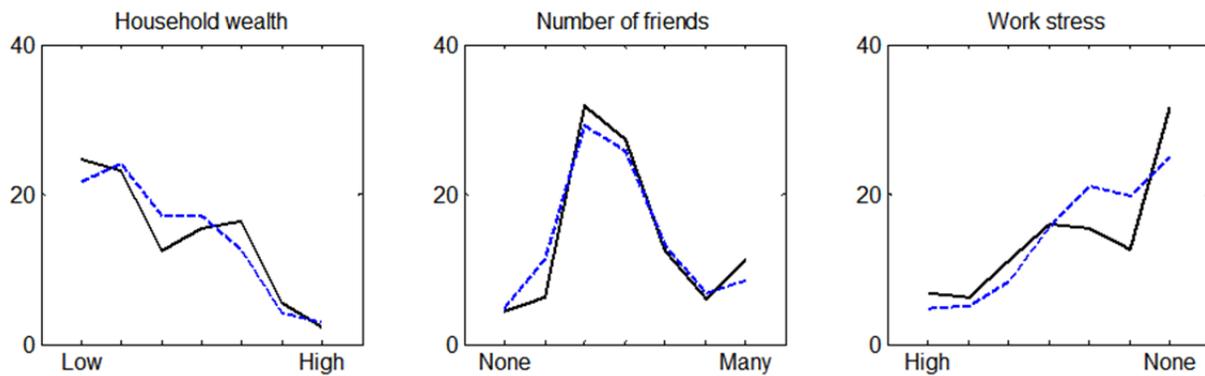
Theoretical Rationale

One explanation for the success of vote expectation questions is that they contain information not only about the intentions of respondents themselves, but also about their friends and family (Rothschild & Wolfers, 2011). This suggestion resonates with accumulating evidence that people make quite accurate judgments about their immediate social circles – people they are in a regular contact with (Galesic, Olsson, & Rieskamp, 2012; Dawtry, Sutton, & Sibley, 2015). For example, data from Galesic et al. (2012), displayed in Figure 1, shows that when participants

in a national Dutch sample were asked to estimate frequency of different characteristic in their social circle, average of these estimates corresponded to actual population values quite closely (Figure 1A). On the other hand, participants' estimates of frequencies of different characteristics in the general population showed, on average, some systematic biases (Figure 1B). The lower accuracy of population estimates probably results from people's much weaker direct experience with the members of general population than with their social circle. In fact, as suggested by the social sampling model of Galesic et al. (2012), and supported by data of Dawtry et al. (2015), people probably infer general population values from what they know about their social circles, introducing biases in the process.

The findings that people's judgments about the general population are less accurate than their judgments about their social circles open a possibility for augmenting the current vote expectation questions in ANES. First, given that ANES uses a probabilistic national sample, and that social circle estimates are often quite accurate and less biased than population estimates (as described above), answers to question about vote share expectation in one's social circle could on average provide better estimate of election results than answers to the current question about vote expectation in the general population. Second, the present vote expectation questions in ANES ask only about which candidate one expects to win. The answers cannot be straightforwardly translated into vote-share forecasts (Graefe, 2014). Therefore, to gain information beyond these simple categorical responses, and enable more straightforward use of vote expectations for predictions about candidate shares, we propose asking about *predicted percentage* of people voting for different candidates *in the general population and in one's social circle*.

A. Average social circle distributions, compared to actual population values



B. Average population estimates, compared to actual population values

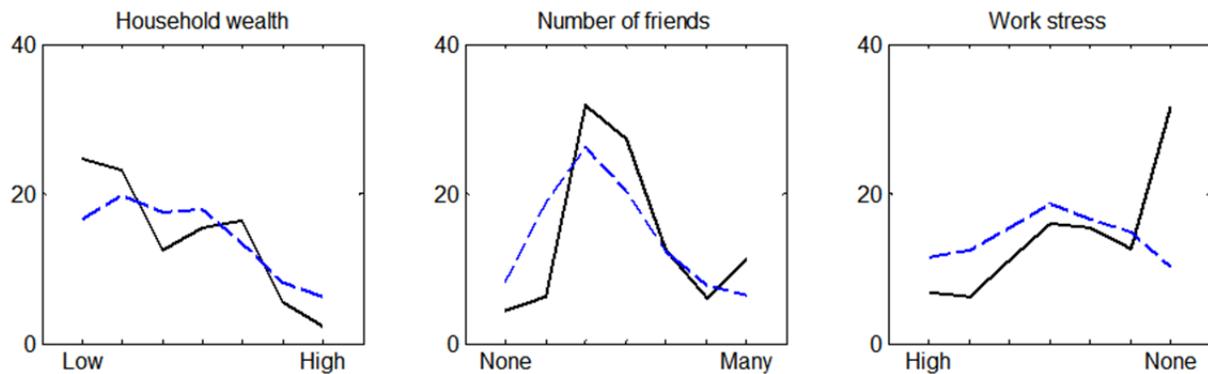


Figure 1. Comparison of actual population distributions for three different characteristics, obtained from probabilistic national sample in the Netherlands ($n=1,416$, full lines), with average of participants' estimates of their social circle distributions (panel A, dashed lines), and average of their estimates of the same distributions in the general population (panel B, dashed lines). Note that social circle estimates correspond to actual population values more closely than population estimates.

Proposed Questions

We propose to use questions for eliciting social judgments that were validated and refined in a series of previous studies, including Galesic et al., (2012, 2013, 2014), and Dawtry et al. (2015). Of particular relevance here, these questions have been applied to the study of

expected vote share in German federal elections in 2013 (Galesic et al., 2014) and have produced valid and reliable results.

Question 1: Expectation about percentage of different voters in the U.S. population.

We would now like you to think of all *adults living in the United States*. We will call these people *the general population*. For the next question, please consider only those people in the general population who are likely to vote in the Presidential election in November. We would like you to give your best guess about what percentage of these *likely voters in the general population* will cast their vote for each of the presidential candidates.

You can use any number between 0% and 100%. It is important that in the end the percentages assigned to the different candidates add up to 100%. If you are unsure just give your best guess.

Of all people in the general population who are likely to vote, what percentage do you think will vote for ... Candidate 1? ____ % Candidate 2? ____ % Candidate 3? ____ % [etc]

Question 2: Expectation about percentage of different voters in own social circle.

We would now like you to think of all *adults living in the United States with whom you had verbal contact with, either in person or otherwise, in the last month*. We will call these people *your social circle*. For the next question, please consider only those of your social contacts who are likely to vote in the Presidential election in November. We would like you to give your best guess about what percentage of these *likely voters in your social circle* will cast their vote for each of the presidential candidates.

You can use any number between 0% and 100%. It is important that in the end the percentages assigned to the different candidates add up to 100%. If you are unsure just give your best guess.

Of all your social contacts who are likely to vote, what percentage do you think will vote for ... Candidate 1? ____ % Candidate 2? ____ % Candidate 3? ____ % [etc]

Ideally, it would also be useful to ask about expected percentage of likely voters in one's social circle and in the general population, as well as about the size of one's social circle. However, these questions might exceed the space available in ANES for new items, so we provide them only in the Appendix.¹

Psychometric Characteristics of Proposed Questions

Validity of social judgments. Figure 1 shows how average of social circle judgments and average of population judgments corresponded to actual population values estimates from a national probabilistic sample (Galesic et al., 2012). Both social circle and population judgments show significant correspondence with actual population values, but median correlations between actual population distributions and average social circle distributions were higher, and root mean square errors lower ($r = .87$ and $RMSE = 4.85$) than those between actual population distributions and average population estimates ($r = .57$, $RMSE = 8.89$, respectively).

Reliability of social judgments. In the study before German federal elections (Galesic et al., 2014), participants were asked to make judgments about five different characteristics of their social circles twice, a week apart. Median test-retest correlations were high, ranging from $r = .68$ for income, .85 for their political orientation, .87 for level of stress, .91 for their voting behavior, to .92 for education.

¹ Technical notes: Question texts may need to be adjusted slightly to fit the face-to-face vs. online administration. The order of questions should ideally be randomized and recorded to enable analyses of any context effects. If responses do not sum to 100%, participants should ideally be prompted to revise their answers (although most participants in previous studies provided answers that summed to 100% even without prompts). A running tally in online version would be useful but we are not proposing it, in order to achieve greater correspondence between face-to-face and online versions.

Merit of Inclusion in ANES

The proposed questions would augment ANES' existing vote expectation questions, facilitate predictions of vote share, and contribute to theoretical understanding of social influence on voting behavior. The interpretation of results will be much facilitated by the wealth of data already collected within ANES about exposure to election coverage in different media (e.g. the extensive section VII. Media, see <http://electionstudies.org/CoreUtility/all.htm>), frequency of discussions about politics with family and friends (e.g. questions 1253 and 1254), experience of persuasion by their social contacts (e.g. question 1389), and others.

Relevance and Generalizability

Answers to the proposed two questions have the potential to provide a number of theoretical and methodological insights. First, given that ANES uses a probabilistic national sample, average of expected share of voters for different candidates in participants' social circles are likely to be a useful prediction of overall vote share. We expect it to contribute predictive information over and above individual voting intentions, the current vote expectation question, and the expected vote share in the general population.

Second, the question about expected share of voters for different candidates in the general population will augment the current vote expectation question in ANES and enable more precise and straightforward predictions of vote share.

Third, the results will provide novel evidence about the way people make social judgments about broader social environments. According to the social sampling model of Galesic et al., (2012), people make judgments about the general population based on what they know about their social circles. If this is true, we should find a significant correspondence between individuals' social circle expectations and their expectations for the general population,

even after controlling for the overall election results. Such a finding would have implications for understanding why beliefs persist in some segments of the society although they tend to be rejected on the population level.

Fourth, the longitudinal nature of ANES will enable examining causal relationships between the vote expectations of one's social circle and own political beliefs and behaviors (and vice versa).

Fifth, using expectations for social circles rather than, or in addition to, expectations about the general population has the potential to reduce negative effects of publicly released polling results on accuracy of vote expectations. To the extent that polls are more and more likely to produce erroneous predictions (Zukin, 2015), people's population-level vote expectations might be wrong as well and hinder the usefulness of these questions for predicting election results. Indeed, Galesic et al. (2014) have found that individuals' population expectations regarding the Federal elections in Germany in 2013 were to a large extent influenced by their knowledge of polling results. In contrast, people's social circle expectations are less likely to be affected by media reports and thus be more accurate.

Sixth, vote share expectations for both one's social circle and the general population might be less prone to social desirability effects than own reports of voting intentions. Candidates whose vote share might be underestimated because participants are too embarrassed to say they will vote for them might show more accurate vote share in vote share expectation questions.

Finally, if expectations about voting patterns in participants' social circles prove to be relatively accurate, the results can provide insights into homophily of social circles of individuals differing in demographic characteristics, political orientation, and voting behavior. This will add

to the current discussion about the prevalence and effects of so called “echo chambers” that may be a contributing factor to the polarization of our society (e.g., Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Iyengar & Hahn, 2008).

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Appendix:

Optional questions about the percentage of likely voters and size of one's social circle

The following questions would be a useful addition to the two questions proposed in the main text, but are not essential if they exceed the ANES' limit for new items.

Size of social circle. The size of one's social circle can be used as an adjustment for the weight one's social circle has in the overall election results. It can also serve as a proxy for adjusting for possible measurement errors: people with smaller social circles may have more accurate knowledge about how their contacts are going to vote; at the same time they may have harder time translating their frequency estimates in percentages.

We would now like you to think of all *adults living in the United States with whom you had verbal contact with, either in person or otherwise, in the last month*. We will call these people *your social circle*.² What is your estimate of how many people you have been in such contact with last month? With ____ people.

² Note that the two introductory sentences in this and the next two questions are equivalent to those for the respective questions in the main text. They do not need to be repeated twice if the questions are asked adjacent to each other. They are provided here for clarity.

Percentage of likely voters in the general population and in one's social circle. These questions can help predicting voter turnout in a similar way as the questions suggested in the main text can help predicting vote share. In addition, percentage of likely voters in one's social circle can be used to gauge the political activity of one's social circle and adjust the weight one's social circle has in the overall election results.

We would now like you to think of all *adults living in the United States*. We will call these people *the general population*. For the next question, please consider only those people in the general population who are likely to vote in the Presidential election in November. What is your best guess about the percentage of people in the general population who are likely to vote in this election? You can use any number between 0% and 100%. If you are unsure just give your best guess. ____ %

We would now like you to think of all *adults living in the United States with whom you had verbal contact with, either in person or otherwise, in the last month*. We will call these people *your social circle*. For the next question, please consider only those of your social contacts who are likely to vote in the Presidential election in November. What is your best guess about the percentage of your social contacts who are likely to vote in this election? You can use any number between 0% and 100%. If you are unsure just give your best guess. ____ %