

Author(s): Knack, Stephen

Title: Social Altruism and Voter Turnout: Evidence from the 1991 NES Pilot Study

Date: January 1992

Dataset(s): 1991 Pilot Study

Abstract

Knack uses data from the 1991 Pilot Study to gauge the effect of civic norms on electoral participation. The Pilot Study contained questions designed to measure a respondent's level of social altruism and level of trust in other citizens. Knack finds that high scores on these measures significantly increase a respondent's likelihood of voting. In addition, the impact of the social altruism and trust variables on the probability of voting are comparable to the effects of the political variables and registration provisions which receive more attention in the turnout literature. Factor analysis provides further support for the notion that voting participation in national elections is primarily a civic minded, rather than a politically-driven, behavior. Specifically, Knack finds that voting in the 1988 and 1990 elections loads heavily with the social altruism items, but fails to load on the second "political participation" factor.

**SOCIAL ALTRUISM AND VOTER TURNOUT:
EVIDENCE FROM THE 1991 NES PILOT STUDY**

**Stephen Knack
George Mason University
Center for Study of Public Choice**

January, 1992

I. The Voter's Calculus

Beginning with Downs (1957), the decision to vote in mass elections has been recognized by many theorists as a classic collective action problem: since elections are rarely close enough for a single vote to determine the outcome, self-interest appears to dictate abstention, as each individual faces incentives to free ride on the participation of others. The Downsian expected-utility model of voter participation is captured in the equation

$$R_i = P_i B_i - C_i + D_i,$$

where R is citizen i 's expected net benefit from voting, P is i 's subjective probability of casting a decisive ballot in favor of i 's preferred candidate, B is the benefit to i from the victory of his or her preferred candidate, and C represents i 's costs of voting.

Given the infinitesimal value of the "instrumental" or collective benefits of voting (PB), if voting requires even a small investment in time and effort, "a reflective voter must conclude, as he is going to the polling place, that whatever impels him there, it is not the impact of his vote on the outcome" (Coleman, 1990, p. 289). "Expressive" or private benefits to voting, such as satisfaction at fulfilling one's sense of civic duty, represented by D in the voter's calculus, are thus necessary to reconcile observed turnout rates with a rational choice approach (Mueller, 1989).

Uhlaner (1986, 1989a, 1989b) and Morton (1991) have

developed turnout models in which voter participation is mobilized by political parties, interest groups, and reference groups. The more one candidate is preferred by the group to the opposing candidate, the more resources group leaders will expend on stressing the duty of members to vote (Uhlener, 1986, 1989b). Knack (1992) presents evidence, however, that loyalty to these groups is not the primary source of the widespread sense of duty to vote.

At least 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). The group-mobilization models of Uhlener and Morton suffer, in this view, from a misplaced emphasis on provincialism. 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. Mass political involvement is also believed to help keep leaders accountable to the citizenry: "Democratic institutions owe their survival to the keen participation of citizens in the life of the polity" (Chapman and Palda, 1983, p. 337).

II. Voter Participation as Social Altruism

If voter turnout is indeed motivated in large part by societal or "civic" norms, then citizens who behave in other socially cooperative ways should also tend to be voters. The same sense of social obligation or altruism that helps explain charitable giving or driver courtesy, for example, should also characterize voters. The underlying distinction in this approach to explaining voter participation is between behaviors and attitudes concerned with narrow personal goals, and those directed toward wider social goals. In this view, the political dimension of voting, i.e. the distinction between behavior with political content (e.g., campaign participation, writing to public officials, voting) and without political content is seen as secondary. Voting is, first and foremost, a selfless act, which may be largely unrelated to forms of political participation which often have a significant basis in self-interest, such as particularized contacting or contributing to campaigns.

Knack (1992) provides evidence based on both survey and aggregate-level data that voter turnout is correlated cross-sectionally with census response rates, crime rates, charitable giving, and cooperative attitudes such as trust in people. While time-series data are comparatively sketchy, there is also some evidence that the turnout decline can be linked to a general erosion of cooperative behaviors and attitudes.

III. Analysis of Piloted Cooperation Items

The 1991 NES Pilot Study contains a series of "social altruism" items (see Appendix) permitting further exploration of the link between turnout and sense of social obligation, at the level of the individual. Pilot respondents were asked about charitable giving, volunteer work, census participation, working to solve community problems, and willingness to serve on juries. Additionally, two items measuring trust in one's fellow citizens were included; it is expected that one's beliefs concerning the willingness of others to cooperate will influence one's own propensity to vote, give to charities, etc. The perception that others are doing their "fair share" should increase the incidence of one's own civic-minded behavior (see Hardin, 1982, for a discussions of conditional cooperation).

A factor analysis of these seven variables yields two interpretable factors, with the two trust-in-others variables loading highly on one factor, and four of the five cooperation variables loading on the second factor (Table 1). These two factors can be employed as explanatory variables in a turnout equation: indexes of "conditional cooperation" and "social altruism" can be constructed from the observed variables to represent these underlying factors hypothesized to affect voter participation.

While factor scores could be used to construct these composite variables, the analyses presented here instead employ factor-based scales, in which each item loading highly on a

factor receives equal weight in the index. The effects on turnout of these simpler indexes, as estimated from regression models, are more easily interpretable than with factor scales. Regression results are virtually identical using either method, as the Pearsonian correlations between factor and factor-based scales are .9663 and .99997 for social altruism and conditional cooperation, respectively.¹ Also for ease of interpretation, index components were not z-scored. Again, it makes little difference in the regression results: largely because means and standard deviations of the components of each index do not vary widely, the simple indexes and the z-scored indexes are nearly perfectly correlated.² "Conditional cooperation" is thus defined as the unweighted sum of positive responses to the trust-in-others items, while "social altruism" is the unweighted sum of four of the cooperation items, with census participation dropped.³

¹The models' goodness-of-fits are actually slightly higher with the factor-based scale than with the factor scale. Alwin (1973, pp. 208-210) argues that "even under the best of circumstances, there may be little gained by way of predictive and theoretical power" from the use of factor score estimation as opposed to arbitrary common sense weighting of variables in composites.

²In contrast to factor scoring, z-scoring marginally improves rather than reduces goodness-of-fit of the models here. For example, the LRI in Table 3 would be increased from .229 to .232 by z-scoring. These results are consistent with the conclusions of others that z-scoring is more important than factor scoring in index construction (Sigelman and Yough, 1978).

³Census participation was more highly correlated with other socially cooperative behaviors in a previous, local survey (Knack, 1992, p. 144). Increasing passage of time since the 1990 Census

These variables were included in logit models with validated turnout in the 1990 and 1988 national elections as dependent variables. In both equations, "social altruism" and "conditional cooperation" are found to significantly increase the likelihood of voting (Tables 2 and 3; see Appendix for coding of independent variables). The impact of these variables--and other social and psychological measures such as marital status and church attendance--on the probability of voting are found to compare favorably with the effects of political variables and registration provisions receiving more attention in the turnout literature and policy debates (OLS estimates in the final column of Tables 2 and 3, multiplied by 100, are a rough approximation of the impacts on the probability of voting). The presence of other races on the ballot, and innovations making it easier to register, had relatively little impact on voting participation among the Pilot respondents.⁴ For many citizens, the "benefits" associated with behaving in a socially responsible manner appear to dwarf the effects of other incentives and disincentives to vote.⁵

was conducted may be introducing further error into this item.

⁴Mail-in registration provisions were not significant predictors of turnout in either year, and were dropped from the equations.

⁵The standard NES civic-duty-to-vote item was unfortunately not included in the 1990 survey or in the Pilot Study. However, in a previous, local survey with 280 respondents, a three-item "social altruism" index was found to significantly increase the probability of voting (OLS parameter estimate = .06, $p = .05$) independently of the civic duty measure.

It is plausible that the effects of cooperative attitudes estimated from the Pilot Study actually represent lower bounds: the least cooperative of the original sample are arguably overrepresented in the 22 percent attrition rate for the 1990 Study respondents targeted for re-interview for the Pilot, and among those originally targeted for the 1990 Study who refused to be interviewed. When the noncooperative drop out of the sample, reduced variability in cooperativeness among those agreeing to be re-interviewed would tend to make estimation of altruism's effects on turnout more problematic. In short, a study in which respondent cooperation is of interest will be particularly sensitive to problems of survey nonresponse.

Further support for the view of voter participation in national elections as primarily civic-minded rather than politically-directed behavior is obtained from a factor analysis of the four social altruism variables and six indicators of political activity available in the 1990 NES survey.⁶ Voting in the 1988 and in the 1990 elections loads heavily on the first factor--along with the social altruism items--but both fail to load on the second, "political participation" factor (Table 4).⁷

⁶See Kim, Nie and Verba (1977) for justification and an example of factor analyzing dichotomous variables. As they recommend in cases where underlying correlations between variables are relatively low, ϕ is used here instead of ϕ/ϕ_{\max} . Susmilch and Johnson (1975) also factor analyze dichotomous data.

⁷It might be objected that the "altruism" factor is actually merely a positive response set factor. Turnout is validated, however; furthermore, vote "overreporters" (about 25 in the portion of the Pilot sample asked the altruism questions) were deleted from the sample on the presumption that they were also the most likely

IV. Conclusion: Interpreting the Turnout Decline

The link between voter participation on one hand, and social altruism and conditional cooperation on the other, leads to an interpretation of the continuing turnout decline strikingly different from other, more influential views. Registration barriers are often cited as being responsible for low American voter participation (e.g., Piven and Cloward, 1988). Since 1960, however, poll taxes and literacy tests have been abolished, mail-in registration and multiple-agency registration have each been introduced in about half of the states, residency requirements have been drastically reduced, and registration closing dates have been moved closer to election day in many states. Election-day polling hours have generally been lengthened, and absentee voting eligibility has been broadened in most states.

Perhaps the most popular explanation for falling turnout is voter cynicism and disillusionment. Such a view receives virtually no support from analyses of elections data, as NES measures of trust in government are typically not correlated cross-sectionally with turnout, and fail to display a time trend at all consistent with that of turnout. On the other hand, the trust-in-people items are both strongly correlated cross-sectionally, and one of them shows a strong downward trend since the 1960s (Knack, 1992). Furthermore, there is strong evidence that the turnout decline has been accompanied by drops in other forms of socially cooperative behaviors (Knack, 1990, 1992).

to misreport other socially cooperative behaviors.

From this perspective, declining turnout is seen as part of a broader social phenomenon, rather than a narrowly political event. A general deterioration of civic norms, along with their supporting internal and external sanctions, has apparently resulted from large-scale social and economic changes weakening family and community ties. As citizens of our large and mobile society find themselves in fewer repeated interactions with others, rules of thumb prescribing cooperation appear less beneficial and interpersonal trust begins to decay (see Knack, 1992, for a fuller discussion of these issues). Further tinkering with the costs of voting--such as relaxing registration obstacles, and abandoning the use of registration lists for juror selection (Knack, 1991)--may succeed in slowing the turnout decline, but cannot reverse its underlying cause, the erosion of civic-mindedness in America.

TABLE 1

Factor Pattern Matrix

Variables	Varimax Orthogonal Rotation		Promax Oblique Rotation	
	Factor 1:	Factor 2:	Factor 1:	Factor 2:
Trust in people	0.616	0.141	0.625	0.018
People helpful	0.606	0.142	0.615	0.021
Gave to charity	0.126	0.276	0.081	0.264
Volunteer work	0.131	0.511	0.040	0.512
Work w/community	0.046	0.457	-0.040	0.472
Jury cooperation	0.137	0.267	0.094	0.253
Census particip.	0.092	0.086	0.081	0.071

Variance explained: 11.6 % 11.1 %

TABLE 2: 1990 Turnout

Variable	Logit parameter estimate	t-ratio	OLS parameter estimate
Intercept	-3.083	-4.09	-0.030
College	0.527	1.94	0.079
Homeowner	0.784	2.88	0.139
Age 51+	1.448	5.33	0.258
Married	0.458	1.71	0.082
Churchgoer	0.785	3.11	0.141
Reside < 2 years	-1.211	-4.31	-0.199
Guber. race	0.448	1.20	0.069
Senate race	-0.440	-0.48	-0.063
Agency reg.	0.427	1.73	0.073
Reg. closing date	-0.007	-0.48	-0.001
Social altruism	0.437	3.51	0.072
Conditional Coop.	0.411	2.80	0.073
N = 421 likelihood ratio index: .291			

All variables are dichotomous, except for registration closing date (no. of days), and the 4-point social altruism and 2-point conditional cooperation indexes.

TABLE 3: 1988 Turnout

Variable	Logit parameter estimate	t-ratio	OLS parameter estimate
Intercept	-0.564	-1.03	0.404
College	0.595	2.32	0.100
Homeowner	0.598	2.36	0.114
Age < 30	-0.503	-1.56	-0.109
Age 51+	0.666	2.28	0.118
Married	0.392	1.52	0.067
Children age < 6	-0.733	-2.27	-0.129
Reside < 2 years	-1.046	-3.93	-0.197
Reg. closing date	-0.035	-2.28	-0.006
Social altruism	0.500	4.21	0.086
Conditional Coop.	0.287	2.01	0.054
N = 421 likelihood ratio index: .229			

All variables are dichotomous, except for registration closing date (no. of days), and the 4-point social altruism and 2-point conditional cooperation indexes.

TABLE 4

Factor Pattern Matrix

Variables	Varimax Orthogonal Rotation		Promax Oblique Rotation	
	Factor 1:	Factor 2:	Factor 1:	Factor 2:
Gave to charity	0.385	0.007	0.404	-0.066
Volunteer work	0.357	0.213	0.332	0.156
Work w/community	0.276	0.124	0.265	0.079
Jury cooperation	0.272	0.087	0.269	0.040
Influence others	0.280	0.378	0.217	0.345
Wear button	0.066	0.554	-0.044	0.572
Attend meetings	0.122	0.562	0.013	0.570
Work for party	0.032	0.476	-0.064	0.497
Contribute money	0.265	0.435	0.190	0.409
Contact Repres.	0.148	0.109	0.133	0.086
Voted 1990	0.605	0.126	0.611	0.018
Voted 1988	0.605	0.050	0.626	-0.062

Variance explained: 11.2 % 10.7 %

Appendix
Coding of Selected Variables

Reside \leq 2 years: Lived at current address no more than two years, = 1, else = 0.

College: If respondent has a college degree, or has some college = 1; else = 0.

Churchgoer: If respondent attends church or synagogue every week, churchgoer = 1, else = 0.

Registration closing date, mail-in registration and agency registration are coded by state. Source: The Book of the States and state election administrators.

Measures of Trust in People

Trust in People: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" "Most people can be trusted" = 1, "can't be too careful" = 0. [Pilot #2831]

People Are Helpful: "Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?" "Try to be helpful" = 1, "just look out for themselves" = 0. [Pilot 2832]

Measures of Social Cooperation

Gave to Charity: "...were you able to contribute any money to church or charity in the last six months?" Yes = 1, No = 0. [Pilot #2846]

Volunteer work: "...were you able to devote any time to volunteer work in the last 12 months?" Yes = 1, No = 0. [Pilot #2829]

Worked with Community: "In the last six months, have you worked with others or joined an organization to do something about some community problem?" Yes = 1, No = 0. [Pilot #2845]

Jury Cooperation: "If you were selected to serve on a jury, would you be happy to do it (= 1) or would you rather not serve (= 0)?" [Pilot #2844]

Census Participation: If respondent's household mailed in their census form, = 1, else = 0. [Pilot #2828]

Measures of Political Participation (all dichotomous)

Influence others vote choices: 1990 Study #366

Wear campaign button or sticker: #367

Attend political meetings: #368

Work for party or candidate: #369

Contribute money to candidate, party, or political group:
#371, #373, #375

Contacted representative: #303

References

- Alwin, Duane F. (1973). "The Use of Factor Analysis in the Construction of Linear Composites in Social Research." Sociological Methods and Research, 2, 191-214.
- Chapman, R. G. And Palda, K. S. (1983). "Electoral Turnout in Rational Voting and Consumption Perspective." Journal of Consumer Research, 9, 337-346.
- Coleman, James (1990). Foundations of Social Theory. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Council of State Governments (1990). The Book of the States, Vol. 28. Lexington, KY: Council of State Governments.
- Downs, Anthony (1957). An Economic Theory of Democracy. New York: Harper and Row.
- Hardin, Russell (1982). Collective Action. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kim, Jae-On; Nie, Norman and Verba, Sidney (1977). "A Note on Factor Analyzing Dichotomous Variables: The Case of Political Participation." Political Methodology, 4, 39-63.
- Knack, Stephen (1992). "Civic Norms, Social Sanctions, and Voter Turnout." Rationality and Society, 4, 133-156.
- Knack, Stephen (1991). "The Voter Participation Effects of Selecting Jurors From Registration Lists." Working paper 91-10, University of Maryland, Department of Economics.
- Knack, Stephen (1990). "Why We Don't Vote--Or Say 'Thank You'." The Wall Street Journal, December 31.
- Morton, Rebecca (1991). "Groups in Rational Turnout Models." American Journal of Political Science, 35, 758-776.
- Mueller, Dennis (1989). Public Choice II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Piven, Frances Fox and Cloward, Richard (1988). Why Americans Don't Vote. New York: Pantheon.
- Sigelman, Lee and Yough, Syng Nam (1978). "Some 'Trivial' Matters that Sometimes Matter: Index Construction Techniques and Research Findings." Political Methodology, 5, 369-384.

Susmilch, Charles E. and Johnson, Weldon T. (1975). "Factor Scores for Constructing Linear Composites: Do Different Techniques Make a Difference?" Sociological Methods and Research, 4, 166-188.

Uhlener, Carole J. (1986). "Political Participation, Rational Actors, and Rationality: A New Approach." Political Psychology, 7, 551-573.

Uhlener, Carole J. (1989a). "Rational Turnout: The Neglected Role of Groups." American Journal of Political Science, 33, 390-422.

Uhlener, Carole J. (1989b). "'Relational Goods' and Participation: Incorporating Sociability Into a Theory of Rational Action." Public Choice, 62, 253-285.