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Why Do People Vote? A Psychological Analysis of the Causes of Voter Turnout

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A great deal of scholarship has explored why some democratic citizens vote while others do not. This article reviews that literature through a lens presuming that a person's likelihood of turning out on election day is a multiplicative function of his or her ability to vote, her or her motivation to vote, and the difficulty of obtaining the needed information and carrying out the behavior of voting. We conclude that (a) turnout is made more difficult and less likely by onerous registration procedures; (b) turnout is more likely among some demographic groups because of greater motivation or ability or less difficulty; (c) the social setting in which a person lives and the psychological dispositions he or she possesses can affect turnout by shaping motivation, ability, or difficulty; (d) characteristics of a specific electoral contest can inspire or discourage turnout; and (e) canvassing and interviewing people about an election can increase turnout, but preelection polls and election-day outcome projections do not. Consequently, an individual citizen's turnout behavior is a joint function of his or her social location, his or her psychological dispositions, the procedures involved in voting, and events that occur at the time of each election.

One of the most fundamental questions challenging political psychologists is why citizens in a democratic country vote. Hundreds of articles, chapters, and books have been published on this issue during the last century. In this article, we offer a review of this literature to highlight many of the fascinating (and sometimes surprising) findings that have emerged from this work, and to propose hypotheses and puzzles to be addressed by researchers in the future.

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Any discussion of voter turnout must begin with acknowledgment of an equation proposed by Downs (1957) that has shaped scholars' thinking in this arena since the earliest work

$$R = (B)(P) - C + D \tag{1}$$

where *R* is the total reward a citizen will gain from voting, *B* is the benefit a person thinks will accrue from having his or her preferred candidate win, *P* is the person's perception of the probability that his or her one vote will change the election outcome, *C* is the cost to the individual of voting in terms of time, money, and other resources, and *D* is the psychic satisfaction the person would gain from voting (Ferejohn & Fiorina, 1974; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968).[1] If R is positive, the citizen is assumed to gain a reward from voting that outweighs the costs and will therefore participate in the election. The more positive R is, the more likely an individual is to vote. In any large election, the probability of casting the deciding vote is thought to be infinitesimally small and is likely to be perceived as such: much, much smaller than the costs of voting (e.g., Chamberlain & Rothschild, 1981). Therefore, the sense of satisfaction gained from voting (D) must make up any deficit caused by the cost and provide sufficient incentive for a citizen to participate.

This equation illustrates the "paradox of voting" (Ferejohn & Fiorina, 1974; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Voting yields benefits only when supported by collective action, so most people should never pay the costs because their effort will never ensure the acquisition of benefits. The mystery, then, is why so many people vote. This surprising behavior is sometimes claimed to be evidence that voters are inherently irrational, although this interpretation has been disputed (see Ferejohn & Fiorina, 1974, for one such discussion).

We examine and evaluate existing research on voter turnout in light of this model of voter decision making. To date, studies have documented many correlates of turnout, and researchers have sometimes speculated about the psychological mechanisms responsible, even more rarely testing such hypotheses empirically. By reviewing the existing evidence and offering our own speculations about possible mechanisms at work, we hope to achieve three goals: (a) to catalogue the field's current understanding, (b) to identify useful foci for future research, and (c) to energize psychologists to study turnout.

Our overarching conceptual framework is slightly different from Downs' equation: an individual's turnout behavior is presumed to be a function of his or her motivation to vote, his or her ability to vote, and the difficulty of the act of voting

[1]Coate and Conlin (2004) offered an extended economic model of the Downsian type, and Foster (1984) provided a counter to the rational choice perspective.

$$\text{Likelihood of voting} = (\text{Motivation to vote} \times \text{Ability to vote}) / \text{Difficulty of voting}. \quad (2)$$

The more motivation or ability a person has to vote, the more likely he or she is to turn out on a given election day. And the more difficult voting is for him or her, the less likely the person is to vote. Thus, a citizen's turnout behavior is likely to be a joint, multiplicative function of these three classes of causes, so pointing to a single factor as causing a person's turnout or lack of turnout would be a vast oversimplification. The multiplicative feature of this equation means that high motivation or high ability or low difficulty is not sufficient to ensure turnout—a deficit in any area may be sufficient to undermine a person's turnout.

Motivation to vote can come from a strong preference for one candidate over his or her competitor(s). But motivation can also come from the belief that being a responsible citizen requires that a person vote, from pressure from one's friends or family to vote, or from other sources that we outline below. The ability to vote refers to people's capacity to make sense of information about political events and candidates in order to form a candidate preference and the capacity to understand and meet requirements for eligibility to vote legally and to implement the required behavior to cast a ballot. Difficulty refers to aspects of conditions outside the voter's mind (e.g., the strictness of procedures regulating registration, the convenience of registration procedures, the degree to which polling locations are publicized, the physical closeness of a person's polling location to his or her home, the availability of information about the candidates). Downs' (1957) (B)(P) term and D term are components of motivation, and his C term is a part of difficulty. But as we suggest below, there are other aspects of motivation and difficulty as well.

Our essay is divided into five sections. The first focuses on registration, a necessary precursor to the act of voting. Understanding the factors that encourage or discourage registration is therefore a necessary first step in this analysis. Second, we explore the demographic correlates of turnout, a focus of a great deal of work. In the third section, we explore how a person's social location and his or her psychological dispositions have impact. The fourth section looks at how characteristics of a particular election contest affect an individual's decision to vote in it, and the fifth section focuses on the influence of canvassing, polling, and election outcome projections.[2]

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[2]Because we are primarily interested in why an individual votes or does not vote, we will not discuss other interesting bodies of turnout research, such as work examining why turnout rates have increased or decreased over time, except when such research helps explain individuals' motivations for voting.

Registration

The costs of registering to vote are among the most significant reasons why many Americans fail to go to the polls on election day. To register, citizens must learn and follow a set of rules about how and when to register, and when a person moves from living in one residence to another, it is often necessary to take action to establish legitimate voting registration status at the new location. Thus, registering requires that a person expend effort to gain relevant knowledge and then to expend effort to comply with regulations. Turnout varies a great deal from state to state, and much of this variation appears to be attributable to variation in the difficulty of voter registration procedures (Kelley, Ayres, & Bowen, 1967; Kim, Petrocik, & Enokson, 1975). Indeed, registration requirements appear to impose such substantial barriers to turnout that if all such requirements were eliminated, turnout might rise by as much as 7% to 9% nationally, according to some estimates in the 1980s and 1990s (Mitchell & Wlezien, 1995; cf., Nagler, 1991; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980).

Barriers to Registration

A person is less likely to register and to vote if he or she lives in a place that imposes more, or more difficult, registration requirements. Such requirements have included annual reregistration, literacy tests, and early cutoff dates for registering before an election (cf. Katosh & Traugott, 1982; Shinn, 1971). Additional aspects of registration difficulty have included the accessibility of physical locations where citizens were permitted to register, whether deputy registrars were permitted to complete registration processes, the number of hours a registration office was open, whether citizens could register during evenings or on weekends, and how many years a registered citizen could fail to vote before his or her registration was cancelled (Caldeira, Patterson, & Markko, 1985; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980).[3] Interestingly, "time-off" laws that require employers to allow employees time off from work to vote do not appear to increase registration, suggesting that work requirements are not a serious impediment (Sterling, 1983).

Poll taxes (mandatory fees for registration) were especially effective at stifling turnout. The 24th Amendment banned poll taxes from federal elections, and in

[3]Disaggregating the effects of various registration requirements can be difficult. Many of these registration requirements, including early closing dates, poll taxes, literacy tests, and periodic reregistration, are strongly correlated, making the effects of each independent variable hard to identify (Ashenfelter & Kelley, 1975). The magnitude of the impact of each barrier to registration is important to understand when designing efforts to reform current practices. Many contemporary organizations have attempted to decrease such barriers, and these sorts of efforts might best be focused on the most consequential barriers (Piven & Cloward, 1988, 2000).

1966 the U.S. Supreme Court declared all poll taxes unconstitutional in *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections*. After the Supreme Court ruling, turnout rates increased dramatically (Fenster, 1994; Shinn, 1971).

The date when registration closes is often singled out as the most prominent contemporary requirement that impedes registration. An early closing date precludes voters from registering right at the time when they are most motivated to do so: during the height of a political campaign, in the very weeks just before election day. Thus, in states with early closing dates, registration is more likely among people who are chronically interested in politics and motivated to vote and less likely among people without that chronic interest but who are inspired to want to participate in an election by campaign events or by changes in local, regional, or national conditions close to election day.

Motor Voter Act

Activists who wanted to increase turnout scored a major victory in 1993 with the passage of the National Voter Registration Act, often referred to as the Motor Voter Act. The Act required states to provide individuals with the opportunity to register to vote (1) at the same time that they apply for a driver's license or seek to renew a driver's license, (2) at all offices that provide public assistance or that provide state-funded programs primarily engaged in providing services to persons with disabilities, and (3) by mail using mail-in-forms developed by each state and the Election Assistance Commission.

Election-day registration eliminates the closing date restriction that seems to have greatly increased turnout (Brians & Grofman, 2001; Knack & White, 2000).

Registration Drives

Registration drives, wherein nonpartisan and partisan groups encourage people to register, attempt to reduce the difficulty of the registration process. Interestingly, people registered via registration drives usually vote at lower rates than do people who registered on their own (Cain & McCue, 1985; Hamilton, 1977; Vedlitz, 1985). Nonetheless, registration drives do appear to increase turnout rates.

Other Voting Costs

Citizens with disabilities have lower-than-average turnout, possibly because their disabilities increase costs of voting for them (Schur & Kruse, 2000; Schur,

Shields, Kruse, & Schriner, 2002). Efforts to reduce time costs, such as allowing people to vote before election day in person and allowing absentee voting on paper, all lead to increases in turnout rates (Berinsky, Burns, & Traugott, 2001; Karp & Banducci, 2000).

The need to gather information about a candidate for the act of voting can also decrease turnout. The more a citizen has to work in order to determine candidates' ideological positions, the higher the person's information costs and the less likely he or she is to vote (Gant, 1983; Panning, 1982). The effect of costs on turnout is even more obvious when both time and information costs are involved. For instance, in, 2003, California consolidated thousands of precincts, making many voters invest time to learn where their new precinct was and to then travel farther than usual to it in order to cast a vote on election day. The information and time costs caused by the consolidation both decreased turnout that year (Brady & McNulty, 2004; Gimpel & Schuknecht, 2003).

Demographic Factors

Education

Citizens with more formal education are more likely to vote; each additional year of education is associated with higher turnout (Pacheco & Plutzer, this issue; Shields & Goidel, 1997; Teixiera, 1992; Tenn, 2007; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Education may impart skills that enhance a person's ability to understand how the civic process operates and how to navigate the requirements of registration. Education could motivate people to vote by instilling civic duty, interesting them in the political process, or placing them in social settings in which voting is normative. Education could also reduce the difficulty of voting, but this does not seem to be the case (Nagler, 1991).

Verbal SAT scores are positively associated with turnout, consistent with the notion that understanding language may facilitate understanding of politics. Math SAT scores are not related to turnout, suggesting that cognitive skills in general appear not to regulate turnout. College graduates who took more social science classes have more civic duty, and these people also vote more than other graduates (Hillygus, 2005; Nie & Hillygus, 2001).

The impact of education on a person's turnout depends partly on the educational attainment and political activity of other people in that individual's environment (Helliwell & Putnam, 1999; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996). The more a person's educational attainment exceeds that of the people in his or her neighborhood, the more likely he or she is to vote. Similarly, the more a person's education attainment exceeds that of others in his or her age group, the more likely he or she is to vote. Comparative educational attainment rates such as these

are much better predictors of a person's turnout than is the person's absolute educational attainment (Tenn, 2005).

Income

Wealthier people vote at higher rates (cf., Filer, Kenny, & Morton, 1993; Leighley & Nagler, 1992b; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). And interestingly, when the health of the national economy declines, the citizens who are hurt most are the most likely to manifest reductions in turnout (Radcliff, 1992; Rosenstone, 1982). This relation could again be due to differential motivation or ability or both. Perhaps less wealthy people have less time available to learn about elections and to cast votes than do wealthier people. Or perhaps more wealthy people perceive that they have a greater interest at stake in elections or have greater senses of political efficacy. People with higher incomes incur greater opportunity costs for spending time on politics and voting (Frey, 1971), but wealthier people may gain greater psychological or social rewards from voting (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

Occupation

There is little evidence that working in an authoritative or high-status job substantially increases an individual's turnout (Sobel, 1993). Workplace authority might be expected to create a greater feeling of social entitlement, which often translates into political participation (Sobel, 1993). However, managers and administrators have lower turnout than professionals from the same economic class (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Turnout does not seem to be influenced by the amount of decision making and power they are afforded at their workplaces, even if that power is given through democratic decisions (Elden, 1981; Greenberg, 1981). However, government employees turn out at especially high rates (Bennett & Orzechowski, 1983; Corey & Garand, 2002; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). This could be because government employees have a clear stake in the outcomes of elections: keeping their jobs and the nature of their work can be influenced by which party occupies particular public offices (Bennett & Orzechowski, 1983; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980).

Age

People appear to become increasingly likely to vote as they progress from early adulthood through middle adulthood; after about age of 75, people become less likely to vote (Strate, Parrish, Elder, & Ford, 1989; Turner, Shields, & Sharpe, 2001). In cross-sectional analyses, differences between age groups in turnout rates could be due to cohort effects: effects of historical events that occurred when a

particular generation of people was at a particular age and that shaped them for the rest of their lives. For example, the politically charged national climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s might have made people who were young adults at that time especially likely to vote throughout the rest of their lives (Beck & Jennings, 1979, see also Jankowski & Strate, 1995; Lyons & Alexander, 2000; Miller, 1992a; Miller & Shanks, 1996; cf., Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). And if the same individuals are tracked over decades of their lives, increases in turnout might be due to historic events that influence all citizens, not to the effects of aging per se. This would be called a period effect.

However, even after controlling for period and cohort effects, increasing age still appears to be associated with increased turnout until late in life. Perhaps older citizens are more established in their communities, have more free time, and/or have more interest in political outcomes. Perhaps as people grow older, they gain skills advantageous to voting, or they may become more motivated because they perceive their age group members to have more at stake economically in election outcomes. Growing older may lower the information costs of voting, because people may become more knowledgeable about the parties and the political process by watching them in action for many years, especially early in adulthood (Strate et al., 1989).

People aged 75 and older may vote less simply because of declines in their physical health, mobility, and energy level (Strate et al., 1989). Participation in more strenuous physical political activities, such as volunteering to work for candidates or canvassing to encourage others to turn out, declines sharply in old age, much more sharply than the less demanding activity of turnout (Jennings & Markus, 1988). Older voters manifest about the same amount of political interest as middle-aged voters, so it seems unlikely that growing older makes people less motivated to vote. Consistent with this logic, Gronke and Toffey (this issue) found that older voters are more likely to take advantage of the conveniences afforded by early voting.

Gender

The effect of gender on turnout has changed dramatically over the years. From the beginning of women's suffrage until the 1980s, women voted less than men (Arneson, 1925; Arneson & Eels, 1950; Glaser, 1959). Women then felt less efficacious and were less informed and politically interested than men and often had less power and responsibility in the workplace (Schlozman, Burns, & Verba, 1999; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997). Since the mid-1980s, though, women have voted at the same rate as men, and sometimes at even higher rates (Leighley & Nagler, 1992a; Schlozman, Burns, Verba, & Donahue, 1995), apparently because women have more efficacy and political interest now.

Mobility

Residential mobility seems to depress turnout (Highton, 2000; Miller, 1992b; Squire, Wolfinger, & Glass, 1987). Just after moving, people are less able to vote, because they must learn how to reregister with a new address and must make time to do so amidst an inevitably busy postmove life. However, longer moves do not seem to depress turnout more (Highton, 2000). Thus, the time and effort required to decide to move, buy a new house, and pack and unpack boxes of belongings may be what causes less turnout.

Residency

People who live in rural areas are more likely to vote than are people who live in urban areas (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Wright, 1976). And farmers vote at substantially higher rates than would be expected based on their levels of education and income (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Farmers might be more motivated to vote either because of their historically high mobilization in movements like the Grange, or because, like people with government-related jobs, farmers are inspired by federal farming subsidies and other farm-related government policies to perceive that they have a lot at stake in elections. Farm laborers, on the other hand, vote at very low rates that are unaccounted for solely by socioeconomic factors (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980), perhaps because of their high residential mobility.

Race

Whites have voted at higher rates than some other racial groups (Matthews & Prothro, 1966; Uhlaner, Cain, & Kiewiet, 1989). For example, turnout among African Americans has been relatively low. During the, 1950s and, 1960s, African American turnout increased sharply because of relaxed discriminatory voter registration laws, increased feelings of efficacy due to the civil rights movement, and increased mobilization efforts by political parties (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1993). As a result, African American turnout increased by 35 percentage points in only 15 years (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1993).[4] However, African Americans have similar, or often even higher, turnout than Whites after controlling for education and income (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Brace, Handley, Niemi, & Stanley, 1995; Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980).

[4]Some scholars have suggested that this apparent increase may be partly illusory, attributable to overreporting of turnout by Blacks more than by other demographics (Abramson & Claggett, 1991; but see Presser, Traugott, & Traugott, 1990).

African Americans may be inspired to vote by dissatisfaction with their minority status (Ellison & London, 1992; Orum, 1966), by strong class consciousness (Guterbock & London, 1983), and by living in areas where Black leaders have high visibility and strong community ties (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990).

Latinos have lower turnout rates than Whites, even after controlling for socioeconomic status (Barreto, 2005; Shaw, de la Garza, & Lee, 2000). The literature has not yet illuminated the mechanisms responsible for this difference, and some work suggests that it is important to distinguish various subgroups (e.g., Puerto Ricans, South Americans, and Central Americans) when seeking such explanations (Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999).

Asian Americans turn out at lower rates than Whites when controlling for socioeconomic status (Aoki & Nakanishi, 2001; Uhlaner et al., 1989). But whereas Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean Americans have especially low registration and turnout rates, Japanese Americans have especially high rates (Lien, Collet, Wong, & Ramakrishnan, 2001). Registered Asians turn out at rates almost as high as those of Whites, so most of the discrepancies across subgroups are attributable to differences in the likelihood of registering (Lien et al., 2001).

Social and Psychological Factors

Neighborhood Characteristics

Living in a higher status neighborhood encourages political participation by people of higher socioeconomic status (Huckfeldt, 1979). Less educated individuals living in highly educated neighborhoods are less likely to take political actions than are less educated individuals living in neighborhoods occupied by people with little education. This may occur because people compare themselves to others around them and are motivated to participate in politics if they feel unusually qualified to have influence and/or feel that they have very different preferences from people around them.

Turnout is also influenced by the political party affiliation of people in their neighborhoods. Republicans vote at unusually low rates when they live in heavily Democratic areas. Thus, perceived lack of local social support for one's views may make voting seem futile. Interestingly, turnout among Democrats is less affected by the party affiliations of their neighbors (Gimpel, Dyck, & Shaw, 2004).

Living in a neighborhood with about evenly balanced party affiliations could increase political participation of the people. Voters could react to diverse political environments by participating more, because it might seem that their own actions have the potential to influence the outcomes of local elections. Diverse environments could also promote contentious discussions of issues and of candidates in

ways that might inspire people to want to express their preferences on election days. However, most available evidence suggests the opposite: diverse political environments seem to decrease people's motivation and/or ability to vote (Costa & Kahn, 2004; McClurg, 2006; Mutz, 2002a,b).

Living in diverse political environments may inhibit people from participating in politics in order to avoid offending one's neighbors (Mutz, 2002a). Also, people living in more diverse environments may feel more ambivalent and hold their political views with less certainty, which may inhibit behavioral expression of those views (Mutz, 2002a). Consistent with these assertions, people living in racially homogenous districts appear to turn out more than people living in racially heterogeneous districts (Schlichting, Tuckel, & Maisel, 1998).

Marriage

Married (and partnered) couples vote at higher rates than singles (Kingston & Finkel, 1987; Petrocik & Shaw, 1991; cf. Stoker & Jennings, 1995). The turnout of married citizens increases faster than the turnout of unmarried citizens as people grow older (Stoker & Jennings, 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Perhaps politically motivated people inspire less motivated spouses to vote, either through explicit persuasion efforts or simply by exposing the spouse to political information. Divorce greatly increases turnout among Whites (perhaps because divorced people have more free time to devote to learning about politics), though not among African Americans or Hispanics (Sandell & Plutzer, 2005).

Participation in Civic Organizations

Voluntary involvement in social organizations can inspire turnout by motivating and enabling people through increasing civic skills (Tate, 1991; Verba et al., 1995). The more a person is engaged in cooperative work with others, the more appealing casting a vote may appear to be.

Trust

People who are especially trusting of others are more likely to vote (Cox, 2003; Holbrook, Krosnick, Visser, Gardner, & Cacioppo, 2001; Timpone, 1998). Perhaps distrustful people think of the political system as corrupt, which might sap their motivation to participate. But low levels of interpersonal trust might also sometimes inspire higher turnout if lack of trust motivates people to take action to minimize the damage they might fear others might inflict.

Over some recent decades, American's trust in people and in the federal government has declined significantly (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Miller, 1980). However, the decline in trust in government does not seem to be responsible for decreasing turnout (Hetherington, 1999; Schaffer, 1981; Wolfinger, Glass, & Squire, 1990).

Political Efficacy

Citizens who have a great sense of political efficacy turn out more (Acock, Clarke, & Stewart, 1985; Craig & Maggiotto, 1982). This is true for both internal efficacy (the belief in one's capability to understand and participate in politics) and external efficacy (the belief in the responsiveness of political institutions to citizen involvement; Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). The higher an individual's efficacy, the more motivated he or she presumably is to cast a ballot.

Group Solidarity

When members of a particular social group (e.g., racial, economic, gender, or age) identify especially strongly with that group, those people develop a group consciousness that appears to increase turnout. People who say that their lives are intrinsically tied to other members of their social group (especially if that group is disadvantaged) appear to change their political behavior accordingly and increase their turnout (Miller, Gurin, Gurin, & Malanchuk, 1981; Tolleson-Rinehart, 1992). People with high solidarity could have higher motivation to vote because they are concerned with issues affecting their group, or their strong connection to members of that group could give them skills that better enable them to vote.

Civic Duty

People who feel a personal sense of civic duty believe they have a moral obligation to participate in politics and are especially likely to vote in elections. Similarly, people who believe that all citizens have the obligation to vote go to the polls more than those who do not hold this belief (Knack, 1992, 1994; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Presumably, civic duty is a source of motivation to turn out.

Habit

Voting is a habitual behavior, meaning that voting once increases the likelihood of voting again (Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003; Plutzer, 2002). There are

several possible reasons for this. First, the social and psychological forces that inspired voting the first time may have enhanced impact directing future voting decisions (Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003; Verba & Nie, 1972). After being successfully mobilized to vote once, a citizen may attract repeated mobilization efforts at the times of subsequent elections (Goldstein & Ridout, 2002; La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). Voting may be self-reinforcing, meaning that the social and psychic rewards one enjoys after voting once may be memorable and motivating at the times of subsequent elections (Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003; Plutzer, 2002). And the act could change a person's self-perception into one of an active, civically engaged individual, and by voting once, a voter might realize the ease of doing it and may therefore be less inhibited from doing it again.

Patience

The costs of voting are entailed before election day (e.g., learning about the candidates, registering), whereas the benefits of voting are not reaped until after the act is performed (e.g., feeling virtuous, seeing one's preferred candidate win). Not surprisingly, then, turnout is greater among people who are patient and willing to wait for bigger rewards later instead of preferring smaller rewards sooner (Fowler & Kam, 2006).

Genetics

Fowler, Baker, and Dawes (2008) recently showed that a large proportion of the variance in turnout can be explained by individual genes. Identical twins manifest turnout that is much more similar than is manifested by nonidentical twins. Genes may influence turnout by shaping any of the psychological factors discussed in this essay.

Characteristics of a Particular Election

Strength of Candidate Preference

The bigger the gap between a person's attitude toward one candidate and his or her attitude toward a competing candidate, the more likely the person is to vote (Holbrook et al., 2001; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). However, this gap is much less consequential if the citizen likes both candidates than if he or she dislikes one or both candidates. If the citizen likes both candidates, then he or she will be happy regardless of the election outcome, even if happier with one than another. But if a citizen dislikes one or both candidates, he or she may be unhappy with one possible election outcome, which may motivate him or her to turn out, especially

if he or she prefers one candidate over the other by a larger margin (Holbrook et al., 2001).

Similarity in Terms of Policy Preferences

The more similar to one another the competing candidates appear to be in terms of their policy preferences, the less likely citizens are to vote in a race, because the outcomes would not differ much in utility (Enelow, 1986; Plane & Gershtenson, 2004). And the more dissimilar a citizen is from the most similar candidate running in a race in terms of policy preferences, the less likely the citizen is to vote (Plane & Gershtenson, 2004; Zipp, 1985). Distance from the closest candidate appears to be a more powerful determinant of turnout than similarity between the candidates (Zipp, 1985).

Closeness of the Race

Many observers have speculated that the closer a race appears to be prior to election day, the more likely voters are to believe that their votes might determine the election outcome. So when preelection polls suggest a race is likely to be a blowout, turnout may be depressed as a result. This notion has received some empirical support (Matsusaka, 1993; Patterson & Caldeira, 1983; Shachar & Nalebuff, 1999). Campaign efforts are usually focused more on areas where a race is close (Cox & Munger, 1989; Shachar & Nalebuff, 1999), and such campaign expenditures increase turnout (Caldeira & Patterson, 1982; Patterson & Caldeira, 1983). But even after controlling for expenditures, the apparent closeness of the race can influence turnout (Cox & Munger, 1989).

Negative Advertising

Competing theories have proposed opposite effects of negative advertising on turnout. Negative ads criticize one candidate while sometimes praising his or her opponent. One theory asserts that negative campaigns encourage cynicism about candidates and apathy among citizens, which demobilizes them (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Min, 2004). Another perspective argues instead that negative ads strengthen attitudes toward candidates (either positive or negative) and create more interest in a campaign (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002; Wattenberg & Brians, 1999). A third line of theoretical reasoning has asserted that negative ads exert no overall effect on turnout, because they depress turnout among some individuals and stimulate it among others (Clinton & Lapinski, 2004; Lau & Pomper, 2001; Martin, 2004). If negative advertising has different effects under different circumstances, this would make diagnosing

its effects more difficult to accomplish (Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Lau & Pomper, 2001).

A range of different methodologies have been used to gauge the effects of negative ads on turnout, and different investigative methods have yielded different results. Support for the demobilization hypothesis has mostly been produced by experimental work that showed participants sets of television news stories with positive and negative ads in the commercial breaks (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino, 1994). Participants who were shown negative ads were significantly less likely to say they intended to vote in upcoming elections. Furthermore, archival analysis of 34 U.S. Senate races indicated that in races with lots of negative advertising, turnout was about 2 percentage points fewer than in races with neither positive nor negative advertising, and turnout in those latter races was about 2 percentage points fewer than in races dominated by positive advertising (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995).

These studies may be limited in terms of external validity, because they involved viewing ads under unusual circumstances, and these studies measured turnout intentions long before election day rather than real turnout behavior on election day (Wattenberg & Brians, 1999). Furthermore, in reanalysis of Ansolabehere and Iyengar's data set on Senate races taking into account third-party candidates, absentee ballots, and other factors, the relation between negative advertising and turnout disappeared (Wattenberg & Brians, 1999). Although a reanalysis of Wattenberg and Brians' (1999) reanalysis confirmed evidence that negative ads decreased turnout (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, & Simon, 1999), experiments embedded in surveys of nationally representative samples of adults and more detailed correlational studies of real elections failed to turn up any evidence that negative ads discourage turnout (Clinton & Lapinski, 2004; Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; see also Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babbitt, 1999).

People may distinguish between negative information presented in a reasonable manner and negative information presented as mudslinging—the former may increase turnout, whereas the latter may not (Kahn & Kenney, 1999).

Other Campaigns

Turnout in a particular race can be affected by events that occur in other simultaneous campaigns. For example, the appearance of an unconventional and surprisingly popular candidate, such as Ross Perot when he ran for president in, 1992, can inspire disaffected citizens to vote when they otherwise would not have done so (Lacy & Burden, 1999). And people are more likely to vote in congressional races in years when a presidential race is going on simultaneously and presumably creates more national focus on political events (Campbell, 1960; Cover, 1985). Similarly, gubernatorial elections and ballot propositions can

sometimes increase the rate at which people cast votes in other races by attracting particular people to the polls (Boyd, 1989; Jackson, 2002).

The Effects of Canvassing, Polling, and Election Outcome Projects

Canvassing

Canvassing efforts involve asking or encouraging people to vote and can have substantial effects on turnout. Knocking on doors and reminding people to vote seems to be the most effective (Gerber & Green, 2000a, 2005; Green & Gerber, 2004; Green, Gerber, & Nickerson, 2003; Michelson, 2003). Mailing or delivering a written encouragement to people seems to be less effective (Gerber & Green, 2000a, 2005; Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003). Canvassing may enhance turnout because it helps citizens determine where to go to vote, reminds them about the election date to permit advance planning, enables citizens by giving them information about the candidates and issues, or induces citizens to make oral commitments to participating in the election, which can be self-fulfilling.

Despite an enormous amount of money that has been poured into paying for telephone calls to potential voters by campaigns and other organizations, such calls seem to have no effects on turnout at all (Cardy, 2005; Green, 2004; Gerber & Green, 2000b, 2001, 2005; McNulty, 2005).

Preelection Polls

Prior to elections, survey researchers often conduct polls to gauge the popularity of the competing candidates. These "horse race" polls are often heavily covered by the news media and might influence turnout, especially if the polls show that a race is not as close as citizens thought. In fact, however, it appears that such polls do not influence turnout (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994).

Predictions of Election Outcomes on Election Day

Some observers have posited that if the new media projects the outcome of an election before the polls have closed all across the country, some citizens may be discouraged from casting votes. Some studies suggest that election-day forecasting of election results has no effect on turnout (Epstein & Strom, 1981). But other studies suggest that election-day forecasting of election results does slightly depress turnout (Crespin & Vander Wielen, 2002; Delli Carpini, 1984).

This is some of the most direct evidence in support of the claim that citizens cast votes in order to affect the outcome of a race.

Being Interviewed for a Political Survey

A number of studies have explored the possibility that interviewing citizens for an hour or more about politics prior to an election may inspire them to vote at a higher rate. Such an interview may enhance feelings of efficacy and civic duty and might activate a desire to avoid the guilt of not voting. An extensive interview might also remind people of reasons why they might want to vote. Consistent with this reasoning, participating in a preelection survey does increase turnout, sometimes dramatically (Granberg & Holmberg, 1992; Yalch, 1976). Even participating in an extremely short survey simply asking people whether they plan to vote on election day has the capacity to increase turnout (Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, & Young, 1987; cf. Smith, Gerber, & Orlich, 2003).

Conclusions

Some of the research findings reviewed above are consistent with the general notion that a person will vote if the information and time costs of doing so are outweighed by the benefits of potentially casting the deciding vote and the rewards (or avoided costs) from voting. And the above literature is also consistent with the general claim that an individual's decision about whether to vote is a function of his or her motivation to vote and ability to vote and the difficulty of the task. Many of the factors we have discussed might affect more than one of these general classes of mediators. For instance, a high level of education could motivate an individual to vote and might enable the person to vote or might decrease the costs of voting. Moving frequently could reduce a person's ability to vote (because he or she may not have had time to acquire the needed information about local candidates and issues) and could make it harder for a person to figure out where to vote, thus increasing costs.

Unlike motivation and ability, the difficulty of voting depends not on the individual but on factors external to him or her. Changing locations of polling places, increasing requirements for registration, and withdrawing political cues by switching to nonpartisan elections makes voting more difficult for anyone, so such events cause fewer people to go to the polls. Conversely, allowing election-day registration, simplifying ballots, and permitting absentee or online voting make turning out easier.

Many observers of American elections have lamented the fact that about half the electorate votes in presidential elections, and even fewer vote in other races. Low turnout became an increasing concern between 1970 and 1990, when

Americans went to the polls in steadily decreasing numbers. Organizations that wish to increase turnout can choose to concentrate their efforts on any one of our three mechanisms: ability (by educating voters), motivation (e.g., by canvassing face-to-face), or task difficulty (e.g., permitting election-day registration).

Coda

We hope that this literature review inspires psychologists to devote more attention to studying voter turnout. All of the factors that influence turnout presumably do so via psychologically mediated processes. To understand these processes is to enhance psychology's ability to describe the workings of the human mind and the nature of social influence and interaction in a very consequential context. We therefore look forward to future research on all of these topics, illuminating the psychological underpinnings at work.

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