

Turnout and Strength of Habits

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I) Introduction

Social scientists are much better at explaining for whom people vote than whether people vote at all. Not only is turnout sometimes called the decision “that ate rational choice theory” but the social psychological accounts, from *The American Voter* onward, are far weaker explanations of turnout than of candidate or party choice. Turnout as an act of political participation is also much more poorly explained than are other acts of political participation, whether in the same or different “modes” of participation, to use the language of Verba and his colleagues (Verba and Nie, 1972).¹

It is common to say that voting is habitual, and secondary analyses of survey research does confirm that those who voted in previous elections are likely to vote in future elections (e.g., Green and Shachar, 2000). Yet models that predict such regularity remain relatively scarce and fail to incorporate the considerable progress that has been made in the fields of psychology and neuroscience in recent years into repetitive behaviors.² In particular, “habit” is generally measured via the inclusion of a lagged turnout variable as opposed to the measures of habit strength drawn from psychological models. To that end:

We propose adding a series of questions to the 2006 NES pilot study designed to provide measures to test the hypothesis that the psychological mechanisms promoting habitual repetition can account for the repeated voting behavior of the sub-population of citizens with strong voting habits.

There are a variety of available psychological models that suggest that repeated responding can significantly affect the psychological mechanisms controlling action. Both

¹ This argument is made in detail in John H. Aldrich and Dennis Simon, 1986, "Turnout in American National Elections," Research in Micropolitics, Vol. 1.

² An extensive review of research in this area is provided in Wendy Wood, David T. Neal , and Jeffrey M. Quinn's, (under review), "Repetition in Everyday Life: Habit Prediction, Change, and Regulation."

experimental and observational studies have confirmed that behavior repetition can lead to a change in the neural and cognitive basis of responding. Such a shift indicates the emergence of automaticity as a distinct form of action control. If habitual behavior differs significantly from decisions made under intentional models of choice, this would imply heterogeneity in the factors that promote voting among citizens.³ When actions become habitual, performance is repeated automatically so that is initiated without intention and patterns of behavior proceed despite conflicting intentions and beliefs. While turnout happens at widely spaced intervals, research has shown that even widely (and irregularly) spaced responses can become habitual.⁴ Our proposal will allow us to advance beyond the relatively unspecific tests of habitual voting that have been conducted to date using lagged dependent variables and to directly test hypotheses about habit strength and turnout.

Across psychology, a wide variety of definitions and criteria have been developed for habit formation. Although there are substantial differences between definitions, they share two commonalities: i) habits are acquired slowly over time through repeated performance and signal learning of commonalities across repeated instances of responding; ii) habits exploit regularities between responses and features of performance contexts (Wood, Neal, and Quinn, under review). Accordingly, our questions were chosen to measure both *past frequency of voting* and *stability of the voting context*. Respondents who score highly on measures of both of these constructs – and thus have strong voting habits – should exhibit high levels of automaticity in their patterns of turnout across elections. This should be evident in a pattern in which strength of voting habits predicts subsequent voting. Furthermore, information about the voting process as well as measures

³ See, for example, Wood, W., Quinn, J., & Kashy, D. (2002). Habits in everyday life: Thought, emotion, and action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 1281-1297.

⁴ See for example Ferguson, E. and Bibby, P.A., (2002) “Predicting Future Blood Donor Returns: Past Behavior, Intentions, and Observer Effects,” *Health Psychology*, 21: 5: 513-18.

typically used to predict the turnout of 'rational' voters should become largely irrelevant for forming accurate predictions of these respondents' behavior. Thus, habit strength should moderate the effects of rational choice predictors so that these factors only predict voting for citizens who have not established strong habits. To test this theory, we also include questions measuring the *respondents' own intentions* and *expectations* of future behavior, several measures theorized to matter for rational voters when deciding whether or not to go to the polls, and measures of respondent's *information about the voting process*. Finally, we propose a question to gauge *automaticity* amongst voters directly, hypothesizing that when actions are performed automatically that respondents should report them to also be easy.

We already have conducted preliminary research to evaluate the feasibility of habits as an explanation for repeated voting (Aldrich, Wood and Montgomery, forthcoming). We performed a secondary analysis of the 1972-1976 ANES panel study and obtained initial support for our theory. We used self-reported past voting behavior and the respondents' length of residence in their current community to construct a measure of habit strength based on both past frequency of performance and context stability. We created a dichotomous habit strength variable marking those individuals who scored highly on both dimension as 1's and assigning 0 values to all others. We calculated simple logistic regression models including predictors of habit strength, a number of variables that previous studies have identified as critical for predicting voter turnout (e.g., how much the individual cared about the electoral outcome, the respondent's sense of duty and political efficacy, the perceived closeness of the election), and the interaction among habit strength and each variable. As we had anticipated, the interaction terms were statistically significant indicating that, among people with strong voting habits, the predictive power of these other

factors on voting behavior is weakened. Instead, turnout seemed to be a simple repetition of past voting behavior.

II) Proposal

First, we propose to measure the habit strength of voters by asking respondents about their past voting behaviors using a battery of four questions used on past ANES surveys (or slight modifications thereof).

- In the elections for President since you have been old enough to vote, would you say that you have voted in all of them, most of them, some of them or none of them?
- Now, in 2004 you remember that Mr. Bush ran for President on the Republican Ticket against Mr. Kerry for the Democrats. Do you remember for sure whether or not you voted in that election?
- In 2002, as you know, representatives to Congress in Washington were chosen in from Congressional districts all around the country. Do you remember for sure whether or not you voted in that election?
- Thinking back further to the 2000 election, you may remember that Mr. Bush ran for President on the Republican Ticket against Mr. Gore for the Democrats. Do you remember for sure whether or not you voted in that election?

Although repetition is a necessary condition for the emergence of a habit, it is not sufficient. We expect strong habits to emerge when repetition occurs contiguous with particular environmental cues so that the cues can automatically activate aspects of the response. We therefore also propose new questions designed to gauge the level of stability of the voting environment and social setting in which citizens vote.

- When you go to vote, do you usually go by yourself or do you go with another person?
[Yes, I usually vote with others; No, I usually go to vote by myself]
- (IF YES) When you go with another person, is there someone you typically go with?
[Yes, I typically go with the same person or persons; No, I go with different people]
- Thinking back on past elections do you usually vote in the same location, that is, in the same polling place, or do you vote at different places?
[Yes, I usually vote at the same place; No, I usually vote at different places]
- (IF YES) Roughly speaking, for how many years have you voted at the same location, that is in the same polling place?

If both of these conditions are met – if individuals report both frequent past voting and voting in stable contexts – evidence from behavior research suggests that habits rather than intentions guide action. Thus, we should expect to observe ballistic performance that is resistant to alteration despite conflicting intentions and beliefs. We propose two categories of questions to test this hypothesis amongst the sub-population that exhibit strong habit strength and stable contexts. First, we would expect that measures of habit formation would perform better than individual's own behavioral intentions and perhaps better than the individual's judgments of the likelihood of voting. We therefore propose the inclusion of one standard question used in past ANES studies on the respondents' expectation of voting as well as a new question on the respondents' intention to vote. Expected likelihood and intentions sometimes exhibit different properties, with likelihood representing respondents' rational assessment of what they believe will happen and intentions representing respondents' assessment of what they ideally would like to happen.

- So Far as you know now, do you intend to vote in November or not?
[Yes, Vote; Not Vote]
- In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people aren't able to vote because they weren't registered, or they were sick, or they just didn't have time. How likely do you feel you are to vote in the upcoming elections in November? We would like you to answer using a scale which runs from 0 to 100, where 0 represents no chance that you will vote, 50 represents an even chance, and 100 represents certainty that you will vote. You may use any number between one and one hundred.

We also propose several questions to measure the level of information respondents' retain about the voting process. Again, our expectation is that those individuals with strong habits will exhibit high levels of automaticity and go to the polls independently of their level of knowledge about the voting process itself.

- We're interested in finding out how much people know about the process of registering to vote in their home towns. Do you remember how you first registered

to vote at your current address?

[Registered By Mail; Registered In Person, Other]

- Do you know whether or not people in your town can register to vote at the board of elections?
- Do you know whether or not people in your town can register to vote at the Department of Motor vehicles?

Furthermore, we propose to include questions used on previous ANES studies to predict individual voter turnout (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Miller and Shanks, 1996).

These include four questions that measure a respondent's sense of duty, two questions that measure their sense of external efficacy, one question about the extent to which they care about electoral outcomes, and one question about the perceived closeness of the race. As we stated above, secondary analyses of past ANES studies has revealed that, although these variables are very useful in predicting turnout among some citizens, their impact is strongly attenuated among those citizens who have a strong voting habit.

Finally, we propose one question to attempt to gauge automaticity amongst voters directly. It is possible that, when voting becomes an activity that is performed automatically, individuals will find the behavior easy to perform.

- For you, personally, is it very easy, somewhat easy, somewhat difficult, or very difficult to go to vote?
[Very Easy; Somewhat Easy; Somewhat Difficult; Very Difficult; Don't Know]

Proposed Questions:

The following are the questions we propose to include in the 2006 Pilot Study. Those in bold are questions we believe to be new to the NES, while those in regular font are variants of questions previously included. The latter are included both to measure habit strength and to provide the means to test theoretical propositions and thus the usefulness of the proposed battery.

- In the elections for President since you have been old enough to vote, would you say that you have voted in all of them, most of them, some of them or none of them?
- Now, in 2004 you remember that Mr. Bush ran for President on the Republican Ticket against Mr. Kerry for the Democrats. Do you remember for sure whether or not you voted in that election?
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[Yes, I usually vote with others; No, I usually go to vote by myself]
- **(IF YES) When you go with another person, is there someone you typically go with?**
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[Yes, I usually vote at the same place; No, I usually vote at different places]
- **(IF YES) Roughly speaking, for how many years have you voted at the same location, that is in the same polling place?**
- So Far as you know now, do you intend to vote in November or not?
[Yes, Vote; Not Vote]
- **In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people aren't able to vote because they weren't registered, or they were sick, or they just didn't have time. How likely do you feel you are to vote in the upcoming elections in November? We would like you to answer using a scale which runs from 0 to 100, where 0 represents no chance that you will vote, 50 represents an even chance, and 100 represents certainty that you will vote. You may use any number between one and one hundred.**
- **We're interested in finding out how much people know about the process of registering to vote in their home towns. Do you remember how you first registered to vote at your current address?**
[Registered By Mail; Registered In Person, Other]
- **Do you know whether or not people in your town can register to vote at the board of elections?**
- **Do you know whether or not people in your town can register to vote at the Department of Motor vehicles?**
- **For you, personally, is it very easy, somewhat easy, somewhat difficult, or very difficult to go to vote?**
[Very Easy; Somewhat Easy; Somewhat Difficult; Very Difficult; Don't Know]
- Who do you think will be elected to the House of Representatives in November from your local district?
- Do you think your local congressional race will be close, or will (R'S ANSWER TO NUMBER ABOVE) win by quite a bit?

- I'd like to talk with you about the elections which will take place this fall. As you know, representatives to Congress in Washington are being chosen in this election from congressional districts all around the country. How much would you say that you personally care about the way the election to the U.S. House of Representatives comes out: do you care very much, pretty much, not very much or not at all?
- Now I'd like to read some of the kinds of things people tell us when we interview them and ask you whether you agree or disagree with them. I'll read them one at a time and just tell me whether you agree or disagree. It isn't so important to vote when you know your party doesn't have any chance to win. [*Agree; Disagree; Depends*]
- So many other people vote in the national elections that it doesn't matter much to me whether I vote or not. [*Agree; Disagree; Depends*]
- If a person doesn't care how an election comes out he shouldn't vote in it.
- A good many local elections aren't important enough to bother with.
- I don't think public officials care much what people like me think.
- Voting is the only way people like me can have any say about how the government runs things.

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