



Is there an intrinsic duty to vote? Comparative evidence from East and West Germans



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ABSTRACT

The duty to vote is a strong predictor of turnout, but little is known of its source, leaving much ambiguity around the nature of the motivation. This article shows that a powerful pathway lies in the ethical commitment many individuals feel to their nations. When the state is seen as an extension of one's national community, this national obligation is politicized toward state affairs, including the duty to vote. Conversely, when this linkage is weak or absent, an intrinsic duty to vote is weakened. By revising a key assumption in the traditional calculus of voting, I derive a statistical model to identify a nation-based, intrinsic duty to vote. The model is tested in Germany, where different experiences with unification in the East versus West yield contrasting predictions on an intrinsic duty to vote. The findings suggest new strategies for get-out-the-vote efforts to target the nationalistic source of the duty to vote.

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1. Introduction

Turnout is “one of the most important behaviors for scholars of democratic politics to understand” (Aldrich, 1993, 246). Yet it continues to pose a paradox, since the costs almost always outweigh the direct benefits. To make sense of the millions of citizens who still show up to the polls, scholars have offered a range of explanations. Some have expanded benefits to include expressive rewards (Fiorina, 1976), considered the altruistic benefit to others in addition to oneself (Fowler, 2006), or identified institutional factors that reduce costs (Highton, 1997). A common assumption across these explanations is that turnout is the result of net positive incentives.

Yet a growing body of work on the duty to vote suggests that individuals also vote out of an intrinsic commitment not based on payoffs. Empirically, the duty to vote certainly behaves differently from incentives. For instance, during rainfall, individuals who feel a duty to vote are more likely than those who do not to still show up to vote (Knack, 1994). In surveys, standard cost and benefit variables poorly predict turnout for those who say they believe voting is a duty (Blais, 2000). The duty to vote is quite stable even when individuals move to different places with different political payoffs (Campbell, 2006). These observations are consistent with a long

line of normative and behavioral scholarship that argues that ethical obligations play a distinct role in politics (Sears and Funk, 1990; Stoker, 1992).

Little is known, however, about the source of an intrinsic duty to vote. This gap has led to much theoretical ambiguity on how to explain and subsequently model the duty to vote. As Barry (1970) points out, to say that individuals vote because they are intrinsically committed says almost nothing. To avoid this circularity in logic, scholars of political behavior have often described the duty to vote as another kind of psychic incentive and treated it as such in models of turnout (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Citrin and Green, 1990). Under this framework, there is no conceptual difference between the duty to vote and the excitement from receiving a voter pin. Thus, a large inconsistency persists between our empirical versus theoretical understandings of one of the strongest documented predictors of turnout.

This article aims to clarify the intrinsic nature of the duty to vote by proposing and testing a systematic theory about its source. Drawing on insights about group obligations from political theory and behavioral psychology, I argue that one powerful pathway lies in the ethical commitment individuals feel to their nations. For many, the nation belongs to a special category of groups that can instill, without coercion or incentives, an intrinsic commitment to the collective welfare. When the state is seen as representing “my” national community, this obligation is politicized toward a duty to contribute to state affairs, including the duty to vote. Alternatively,

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when the linkage between the state and nation is weak or broken, as is the case in many transitional democracies, an intrinsic duty to vote is diminished. This conditional identity theory simultaneously explains why we often see a positive correlation between national identification and turnout, but also why this relationship varies significantly across different democratic contexts.

I test the theory in Germany where, within a single state, the identity politics of unification yields contrasting predictions on the intrinsic duty to vote by region. A rapid and unilateral unification led by the West left perceptions of a broken nation-state linkage in the transitioning East, but kept a close linkage in the West. Curiously enough, a sizeable regional turnout gap has persisted since unification. To identify the presence (and absence) of a nation-based, intrinsic duty to vote, I derive a revision to the D-term in Riker and Ordeshook (1968)'s original calculus and test the model with data from the Germany General Social Survey (GGSS).

The findings suggest a new direction for policies aimed at increasing electoral participation. Most existing strategies, such as voter registration drives, information outreach, or targeted campaign messages, focus on providing better incentives to “pull” citizens into political engagement. This article shows that fostering national identification with the state can be a complementary “push” factor that motivates participation from within.

2. Nationalistic source of an intrinsic duty to vote

The duty to vote has been a powerful predictor of turnout since the earliest studies of voting (Campbell et al., 1960; Verba et al., 1995). Recent works using panel data and experiments suggest that this relationship is not just cheap talk, but likely causal (Campbell, 2006; Gerber et al., 2008; Blais and Achen, 2010).

When we observe a relationship between the duty to vote and turnout, however, two scenarios are possible. On one hand, the individual may truly feel an intrinsic commitment to vote, regardless of the payoffs she expects from that election. On the other hand, the individual may fulfill the duty to vote for the bundle of psychic and social rewards it entails – a boost in self-esteem, social praise, or expressive satisfaction. In the former, the duty to vote functions as a distinctly ethical obligation; in the latter, it functions as just another source of indirect benefit. Empirically, the two scenarios are difficult to distinguish since they are a matter of unobserved intent. Theoretically, while a rational explanation exists for the latter, scholars have yet to identify a convincing explanation for the former. From where does an intrinsic commitment to vote arise? This section develops a theory based on the ethical pull of special groups.

Individuals belong to various types of communities. For some groups, individuals are often socialized into membership so as to experience it as an integral and inseparable part of their identities. Family, hometown, or ethnic groups are common examples, but for different individuals and at different points in life, special communities can also include groups such as *alma maters*, professional societies, or religious groups.

Communitarian political theorists have long recognized the power of such memberships to instill an ethical commitment to the collective welfare of the group, even in the absence of coercion or incentives (Sandel, 1984; Walzer, 1990). There exists a “special concern and loyalty” that explains why it is that “for some communities we are disposed to sacrifice a minute of our time; for the members of others, our lives” (Yack, 2012, 4). This claim has been widely confirmed across empirical studies in behavioral psychology. Individuals often go out of their way to act on behalf of or more cooperatively toward their religious or other in-groups, even in experimental and other contexts where there are no material gains to be had from doing so (Bellah et al., 1986; Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

My claim is that the nation is one such special group for many modern individuals. The nation is an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) that sees itself as a singular political collective and shares “the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage one has received in undivided form” (Renan, 1990[1882], 19). National memberships are constructed and even selectable at times (Gellner, 1983; Laitin, 1998), but for many, they are blended continuously into everyday life so as to feel “as if” natural (Verdery, 1993; Billig, 1995). For such individuals, Anderson (1983, 144) notes how the properties of intrinsic ties extend to the nation:

“...in these ‘natural ties’ one senses what one might call ‘the beauty of *gemeinschaft*.’ [...] for most ordinary people of whatever class, the whole point of the nation is that it is interestless. Just for that reason, it can ask for sacrifices.”

I argue that under certain conditions in democracies, ethical ties to the nation motivate an intrinsic duty to the state, including the duty to vote. When the state is seen to represent one's nation, the welfare of the state ultimately feeds back to “my” national community. Thus, citizen activities that contribute to state affairs, such as voting in federal elections, invoke an intrinsic commitment.

What happens when the perceived linkage between nation and state is weak or broken? Especially in transitional democracies, the psychological boundaries of one's nation and the political community supported by the new state may no longer align due to territorial displacement, abrupt regime change, or nationalist secessions. When citizens see the state to represent “the other” nation, federal elections should invoke little intrinsic duty to vote. In fact, for citizens who see their nation as not only different from, but directly threatened by the state in which they live, national commitments may even motivate an intrinsic duty to abstain.

That national identification might relate to higher turnout is not a new insight (Huddy and Khatib, 2007). But exactly what part of nationalism accounts for this relationship, and why, has never been fully specified. The contribution is to explicate the causal mechanism behind the observed correlations for the first time. A nationalistic theory of the duty to vote not only explains why the pattern holds robustly in most established democracies, but also why it varies or breaks down in many transitional democratic contexts. It can also predict, given the unique identity politics of a democratic state, the nature of motivations that sustains its electoral turnout.

The theory can easily be extended to electoral participation at levels above and below federal elections. The most relevant special community will depend on the scope of governance at stake in the election. For instance, in municipal elections, how strongly an individual sees the city to be significant to her identity – as “my” city – should most affect her intrinsic duty to vote. This logic does not preclude the individual from identifying strongly with other communities at the same time.

Ethical ties to the nation are not the sole pathway to an intrinsic duty to vote in federal elections, but they deserve attention as a nearly universal and particularly powerful source. The next section develops a statistical method to identify the presence and absence of this nation-based commitment.

3. Empirical strategy

Intrinsic commitments are difficult to demonstrate because they are a matter of unobserved intent (Broockman, 2013). To overcome this challenge, identification relies on two steps.

First, an important revision to Riker and Ordeshook (1968)'s original calculus of voting leads to a statistical model that captures the intrinsic duty to vote. Equation (1) shows the original calculus,

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