



Measuring the civic duty to vote: A proposal

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ABSTRACT

Civic duty is a central concept in the study of turnout, yet little attention has been paid to how it should be measured. After a careful review of previous measures we constructed an original battery of 13 questions that were administered in a survey conducted in seven countries at the time of the 2014 European election. We show that the battery indeed taps the duty construct. We then propose a reduced battery of four questions. We show that the four questions achieve good fit measures and pass several tests of robustness and validity across the seven countries. We invite researchers to implement this battery in future research.

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1. Introduction

From a purely utilitarian perspective, voting does not appear to be a rational choice given the extremely low probability that one's decision will be pivotal (Owen and Grofman, 1984; Mueller, 2003). Yet most people vote, which is known as the paradox of voting (Fiorina, 1976; Grofman, 1993). Scholars have tried to solve this paradox by manipulating the costs, benefits and probabilities of one's vote of being decisive, but one of the most widely accepted solutions is to include a normative element, the *D term* (Dowding, 2005).

From a normative perspective, people vote not because they calculate that the benefits outweigh the costs but because they consider that this is the 'right', 'ethical' thing to do (Blais and Achen, 2010). This is not a new interpretation. In the classic *American Voter*, Campbell et al. (1960: 105–106) note that turnout is 70% points higher among those with a strong sense of duty than among those with none. In the same vein, Riker and Ordeshook (1968) show that duty (the *D term*) has a strong impact on the propensity to vote. More recently, Verba et al. (1995: 115) report that civic gratifications, among them civic duty, are the most widespread motivation

for voting. Blais (2000: 112) concludes that duty is the overriding motivation for about half of those who vote. Finally, Clarke et al. (2004: 259) find that the variable with the largest effect on turnout is what they call "system benefits", which is analogous to the duty to vote.

In spite of its predictive power and popularity among political behavior scholars, the concept remains fuzzy. The danger exists that it becomes a hodgepodge for all the psychological determinants outside the rational choice perspective. As a result, little attention has been paid to how it should be measured. We hope to fill that gap in this article through a survey conducted in seven European countries which included 13 different questions designed to tap the belief that it is a citizen's moral obligation to vote in a democratic election.

The paper has four goals. First, we propose a clear and simple definition of civic duty and we outline its implications. Second, we review the indicators used in previous research and evaluate their merits and limits. Third, we propose a long (13-question) battery of duty indicators and we show that it satisfies a number of conceptual and empirical criteria. The empirical evidence suggests that the assumption of one underlying concept is justified. Fourth, we propose a reduced battery of four questions that could be used in future research. The reduced battery is submitted to different tests of validity. The results confirm that these four questions can indeed be used to tap the duty to vote.

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2. What is the “duty” to vote?

According to the literature, there are three main motivations for casting a ballot (Carlsson and Johansson-Stenman, 2009). First, people may vote for instrumental reasons, that is, with the intention to affect the outcome (Black, 1948; Downs, 1957). Second, individuals may vote for expressive reasons, that is, to express their views (Brennan and Buchanan, 1984; Brennan and Lomasky, 1993; Brennan and Hamlin, 1998, 2000). Finally, some people vote because they believe that the good citizen has a moral obligation to vote and thus not voting is ethically wrong (Tulloch, 2000). This last motivation is the one we are interested in. *The civic duty to vote is the belief that a citizen has a moral obligation to vote in elections.*

This definition has a number of implications. Perhaps the most obvious is that civic duty is not instrumental or expressive. Duty does not refer to benefits or costs, nor to the potential outcome of an election. It is not a desire to articulate one's views about the options (parties, candidates and/or the issues). Duty is different. The motivation is *moral*; the dutiful person believes that voting is the right thing to do and abstaining is wrong (Uhlener, 1986; Mueller, 1989; Coleman, 1990; Knack and Kropf, 1998; Zuckerman and Kotler-Berkowitz, 1998; Blais, 2000; Blais and Achen, 2010).

This definition of civic duty provides a number of guidelines about how duty should (and should not) be measured. The dutiful person should feel compelled to vote even in the absence of instrumental or expressive reasons, and should dismiss instrumental or expressive ‘reasons’ for not voting. She thinks in ethical terms, such as ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘OK’, ‘should’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’. She should feel ‘good’ when she votes (and fulfills her duty) and ‘bad’ otherwise. More precisely, she should feel guilty if she does not fulfill her civic obligations (Knack, 1992) without good cause. Indeed “guilt is usually thought of (...) in connection with the ethics of duty” (Greenspan, 1994: 57). Since she is convinced that voting is the right thing to do, she thinks about voting as a common good, and she cares whether other people also do the right thing, that is, vote.

The literature suggests that sense of duty stems from group loyalty and/or respect for authority (Graham et al. 2011). Hence, the feeling that one has a moral obligation to vote may derive from attachment to the community or respect for the authorities. The most obvious case is when people believe that they need to prove their patriotism by participating in elections. According to Usher, voting can be construed as a patriotic gesture, reflecting “a willingness to participate in the ceremony of democracy, to take one's place in the parade on which most people sense a good society depends” (2011: 23).

Likewise, those who link the duty to vote to support for democracy reason that a vibrant democracy requires a high turnout and that all those who believe that democracy is a ‘good’ thing should be willing to do their part, that is, they should vote (Downs, 1957; Mueller, 1989, 2003; Fowler and Kam, 2007). Similarly, Dennis relates civic duty to diffuse support for the regime, defining it as the citizen's feeling of obligation ‘to contribute his own resources of time and effort even when particular elections are anticipated to be unfavorable or trivial to his own interests’ (1970: 63). Finally, Dalton (2008) defines citizen duty as adherence to the traditional responsibilities of a good citizen, such as obeying the laws, paying taxes, and voting.

These guidelines inspire the selection of questions that we introduce below. Before doing so, however, we review previous measures of civic duty.

3. Previous measures of civic duty

The duty to vote has been often interpreted as a citizenship

norm (Dalton, 2008). The most commonly asked question is: “There are different opinions as to what it takes to be a good citizen. As far as you are concerned personally, on a scale of 1–7, where 1 is not important at all and 7 is very important, how important is it to always vote in elections?” Many surveys include this question, such as the first wave of the European Social Survey (2002), the World Values Survey, the Citizens, Involvement and Democracy survey (2000–2001), the General Social Survey (U.S. 2004) and the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS).²

The reference to the “good” citizen clearly fits the normative component of duty. The major drawback is that this question asks about people's perceptions of the public norm of citizenship rather than about whether they personally support that norm. As a consequence, there is a strong desirability bias, as the great majority of respondents say that it is very important for the good citizen to vote. Social desirability is the “tendency to respond in self-report items in a manner that makes the respondent look good rather than to respond in an accurate and truthful manner” (Holtgraves, 2004: 161). Of course, a question using value-laden words such as “good”, “should” or “duty” is more prone to be loaded with social desirability. Therefore, correctly measuring sense of civic duty is a huge challenge, once it is recognized that there exists a public norm that the good citizen should vote in an election, and that as a consequence respondents may give voice to the norm even if they have not internalized it.

Previous research has not paid enough attention to the risk of social desirability bias, and the measurement errors that are entailed. Because of measurement error, there is a greater need for the use of several indicators. In fact this should be the case of any attitude. If we believe that sense of civic duty is a powerful determinant of the decision to vote, we need to develop a battery of indicators, as we do for internal and external efficacy, political trust, or cynicism. As Blalock (1974: 5) told us years ago, “there must be a reliance on more than a single measure of each variable.” This is at the heart of the psychometric theory of measurement, and a large number of studies insist on the importance of using several indicators for tapping attitudinal dimensions (Ansolabehere et al., 2008; Carmines and Zeller, 1979; McIver and Carmines, 1981; Nardo et al., 2005). It is part of a large consensus among methodologists that in order to properly measure an underlying latent construct –i.e., ensure identification, achieve proper solutions, estimate and therefore avoid latent errors–a minimum of three or four questions are needed per dimension (Kline, 2005, 2011; Baumgartner and Homburg, 1996; Marsh et al., 1998; Ding et al., 1995; Bollen, 1989).

Following this logic, the American National Election Studies (ANES) used, until the late seventies, a battery of four questions intended to tap sense of civic duty.³ The questions were agree/disagree statements:

1. It isn't so important to vote when your party doesn't have a chance to win.

² A somewhat similar approach is followed by Schwitzgebel and Rust (2014) in a survey of US professors, both inside and outside philosophy, in which the respondents were asked to rate various actions, one of them being ‘regularly voting in public elections’ on a 1–9 scale, from very morally bad to morally neutral to very morally good. Interestingly, voting received a very high mean rating of 7.4, as high as ‘donating one tenth of one's income to charity’ and slightly higher than ‘regularly donating blood’. This is an intriguing approach which has the advantage of directly asking whether voting is good morally and is thus in line with our definition of civic duty. It remains to be seen whether such a question can be put to the general public.

³ Only the fourth question has been asked in some of the more recent ANES surveys.

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