



Original Article

Watchful eyes: implicit observability cues and voting



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Initial receipt 19 November 2013
Final revision received 21 February 2014

Keywords:

Observability
Eyespot effects
Social norms
Political participation
Field experiment

ABSTRACT

Explicit social pressure has been shown to be a powerful motivator of prosocial behavior like voting in elections. In this study, I replicate and extend the findings of a randomized field experiment designed to study the impact of more subtle, implicit social pressure treatments on voting. The results of the original experiment, conducted in the October 2011 municipal elections in Key West, Florida, demonstrated that even subtle, implicit observability cues, like a pair of stylized eyes facing subjects, effectively mobilized citizens to vote, by about as much as explicit surveillance cues. The replication study, conducted in Lexington, KY, during the November 2011 gubernatorial election, corroborates these findings and suggests that eyes effect on average does not likely depend on the gender of eyespots used. Taken together, the two field experiments provide strong support for the notion studies that humans are evolutionarily programmed to respond to certain stimuli and that exposure to images that implicitly signal observability is sufficient to stimulate prosocial behavior.

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1. Introduction

Human beings care about how they are perceived by others and tend to engage in costly, prosocial behavior more often when they believe they are being (or can be) watched (Rind & Benjamin, 1994; Posner & Rasmusen, 1999; Bufacchi, 2001; Andreoni & Petrie, 2004; Barclay, 2004; Barclay & Willer, 2007; Sparks & Barclay, 2013). People cooperate to avoid the social penalties that can result from norm deviant behavior and to develop reputations for altruism and cooperation (Rind & Benjamin, 1994; Posner & Rasmusen, 1999; Whatley, Webster, Smith, & Rhodes, 1999; Roberts, 2008; Barclay, 2011; Sparks & Barclay, 2013). These forces shape human behavior so powerfully that scholars argue that their origins are deeply rooted in human evolution (Trivers, 1971; Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Gintis, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2003; Bowles & Gintis, 2004).

Reputational mechanisms that stimulate prosocial behavior and compliance with social norms appear to be activated by observability cues, like the presence of a pair of eyes or eye-like stimuli (Kurzban, 2001; Andreoni & Petrie, 2004; Barclay, 2004; Barclay & Willer, 2007; Sparks & Barclay, 2013). Eyespots have been demonstrated to raise cooperation rates in both laboratory settings (Haley & Fessler, 2005; Burnham & Hare, 2007; Rigdon, Ishii, Watabe, & Kitayama, 2009; Mifune, Hashimoto, & Yamagishi, 2010; Bourrat, Baumard, & McKay, 2011; Oda, Niwaa, Honmab, & Hiraishic, 2011; Nettle et al., 2013; Sparks & Barclay, 2013) and in the field (Bateson, Nettle, & Roberts, 2006; Ernest-Jones, Nettle, & Bateson, 2011; Ekström, 2012; Francey & Bergmüller, 2012; Powell, Roberts, & Nettle, 2012; Panagopoulos, 2014). For example, field studies have shown that posters displaying

images of eyes caused people to be more likely to remove litter from cafeteria tables (Ernest-Jones et al., 2011), that pictures of eyes placed next to an “honesty box” in a university psychology department coffee room tripled employee donations (Bateson et al., 2006); that pictures of eyes on supermarket recycling machines in Stockholm encouraged more shoppers to donate the proceeds of their recycling to charity (Ekström, 2012); and that passers-by who stopped to voluntarily tidy up litter at Geneva bus stops spent more time doing so when they were adorned with posters depicting human eyes (Francey & Bergmüller, 2012). Even the mere physical presence of others, or other implicit cues of proximity or visibility, stimulates prosocial behavior among those being observed (Dawes, McTavish, & Shaklee, 1977; Kurzban, 2001; Burnham, 2003).

Taken together, these studies provide considerable evidence that eyespots stimulate prosocial behavior and social norm compliance, even when actual surveillance is absent. Cooperation in response to false observation cues has been interpreted “as a by-product of psychological systems evolved to calibrate behavior as a function of predictable reputational consequences” (Sparks & Barclay, 2013: 317). Oda et al. (2011) have argued the eyes effect is mediated by expectation of reward for improved reputation in the eyes of a third party.

In spite of the research summarized above, the pervasiveness of the eyespots phenomenon has been called into dispute by studies that have failed to find effects (Fehr & Schneider, 2010; Lamba & Mace, 2010; Carbon & Hesslinger, 2011) and by recent scholarship that probes the nuances of the phenomenon more closely. This research has raised new empirical and theoretical questions about eyespot effects and the conditions in which they arise. A meta-analysis of 25 eyes effects experiments, for instance, confirmed the effect emerges reliably after short exposures to eyes images, but not after long exposure (Sparks & Barclay, 2013). Baillon, Selim, and van Dolder

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(2013) find eyes effects to be limited to interaction tasks and argue the effect is caused by a “social exchange heuristic” that works to promote mutual cooperation. Also, Nettle et al. (2013) meta-analyze seven studies of watching eyes effects in the dictator game to show that eyespots reliably increase the probability of donation but not mean contribution levels. While the eyes effect appears to be robust across a wide range of interventions, these findings suggest the phenomenon and its interpretation may require refinement.

In the current study, I examine the eyespots phenomenon in the context of voting in elections. To date, only one other study of which I am aware (Panagopoulos, 2014) has studied eyespot effects in this domain. The current study builds on this research and extends it in ways that have the potential to shed light on some of the emerging (and enduring) theoretical controversies about eyespot effects more generally as discussed above. A key goal of the experiment is to explore whether eyespot image gender affects effectiveness, an issue that has been raised in several recent studies (Bateson et al., 2006; Oda et al., 2011; Ekström, 2012; Baillon et al., 2013; Nettle et al., 2013).

In many ways, voting is an ideal context in which to study prosocial mechanisms because it is considered the canonical public good in political science (Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). That is, the primary benefit of voting is understood to be a psychological sense of having done one's (civic) duty (Downs, 1957). No other instrumental benefits are guaranteed to accrue to voters, so their willingness to engage in prosocial behaviors is a crucial determinant of whether they will vote or not (Brennan & Lomasky, 1993; Schuessler, 2000). Because the costs associated with voting often outweigh the benefits (an individual vote has only an infinitesimal chance of influencing election outcomes) (Downs, 1957), explanations for the seemingly irrational act of voting are frequently advanced on the grounds that voters perceive abstention to violate social norms (Knack, 1992; Shachar & Nalebuff, 1999). Studies demonstrate that voting is widely viewed as a civic duty (Blais, 2000), and voters wish, at the very least, to appear compliant with this social norm. Vast overreporting of turnout in surveys would support this contention (Belli, Traugott, & Beckmann, 2001).

In the domain of electoral participation, the desire to comply with prosocial voting norms implies that observation cues should influence voting behavior via evolved mechanisms. Recent randomized field experiments in political science that have demonstrated threats of explicit surveillance elevate voter turnout (Gerber, Green, & Larimer, 2008; 2010; Davenport et al., 2010; Mann, 2010; Panagopoulos, 2010; 2011) corroborate this contention. Exposing voters both to their own and to their neighbors' recent vote histories, for example, elevated turnout rates by more than 8 percentage points on average (Gerber et al., 2008). Similarly, promising to publicize citizens' past voting behavior in the local newspaper (Panagopoulos, 2010) or acknowledging them for voting in prior elections (Panagopoulos, 2011, 2013) also increased electoral participation. Few interventions, even policy initiatives like Election Day registration and vote-by-mail that dismantle barriers to voting, have generated effects of this magnitude (Knack, 1992, 2001). The effects of the threat of surveillance on voter mobilization are not only potent but also enduring, often extending into future election cycles (Davenport et al., 2010).

A recent field experimental study that examined the eyespots phenomenon in particular in a voting context found that exposure to eyes images via postcard mailings elevated turnout levels significantly in the October 2011 municipal election in Key West, Florida (Panagopoulos, 2014). One potential limitation of that study, however, is that the treatment effects the author observed may be attributable to the specific eyes image used in the experiment. The key treatment in the Panagopoulos (2014) study featured an eyes image that belonged to a younger, attractive female. This characteristic may have interacted with the treatment to produce effects. Eye contact often acts as a sign of attraction between people, and studies have shown that individuals who engage in eye contact with others are seen as more likable and more

attractive than if they are seen to disengage eye contact (Frischen, Bayliss, & Tipper, 2007: 699). It is conceivable that the eyes image used in Panagopoulos (2014) could have been perceived as alluring or otherwise compelling and may have even acted as a sort of seduction to lure voters to the polls (Frischen et al., 2007).

The current study replicates Panagopoulos (2014) but substitutes the eyes image with a pair of eyes belonging to an older male. This test would help to disentangle whether subjects are generally responsive to implicit social pressure cues rather than to a specific eyes image. From a theoretical perspective, it is unclear why we would expect eyespot effects to be different depending on the gender of the images used; accordingly, I expect similar effects. To preview the findings reported below, I find little evidence to suggest that sex of eyes image moderates eyespot effects, implying that the eyes effect is likely pervasive rather than peculiar to the eyes used.

The potential importance of the sex of eyes images used in eyespot research is echoed in several, recent studies. In their study of contributions to an honesty box used to collect money for drinks in a university coffee room described above, Bateson et al. (2006) used alternating eyes images that included both male and female eyes (as well as control images) and found that subjects' contributions were greatest when male rather than female eyes were displayed. The authors do not make much of this result, perhaps because the study was not designed to advance a systematic test of eyespot gender, so we are unable to determine if the difference was due to chance or to some other factor besides the gender of the eyes image used. Nettle et al. (2013) also take up the question of gendered eyes effects by systematically varying the sex of the eyes images deployed in a dictator game experiment conducted in the laboratory. The authors found no significant differences in eyespot effects between male and female eyes. In their study, Baillon et al. (2013) use the eyes of a statue in the hope of obtaining a neutral effect. Although Oda et al. (2011) raise the issue that even “neutral,” non-human eyes may have specific symbolic connotations, several studies (Ekström, 2012; Baillon et al., 2013) also argue that neutral eyes are more likely to be identified with a third party, that is, with an observer of the game rather than a fellow player of the game. The former identification implies a reputational effect whereas the latter implies empathy with the individual associated with the consequences of game play. Taken together, issues raised in these studies suggest the role eyespot gender may play in moderating eyes effects remains an open question with important practical and theoretical consequences.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

The field experimental replication was conducted in Lexington, KY during the November 8, 2011 gubernatorial election. The top-of-the-ballot gubernatorial contest pitted Democratic incumbent Steve Beshear against David Williams, the Republican contender, and Gatewood Glabraith, an independent candidate. Beshear ultimately captured 56% of the vote and was re-elected.

The complete experimental sample consisted of 71,593 registered voters residing in single-voter households in Lexington, KY. The sample was restricted to single-voter households to minimize interference between units. Such interference can potentially result in a violation of the Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption (SUTVA), a fundamental assumption in the analysis of such experiments, and add bias to the estimated treatment effects. The approach of restricting the sample to single-voter households has been commonly adopted in field experimental studies of this sort (Panagopoulos, 2011) and is consistent with the approach adopted in Panagopoulos (2014).

Voters were randomly assigned to either the control group or to one of three treatment groups described in the following section. Voters assigned

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