

Inside-out or outside-in? Turnout and the interplay between the duty to vote and social pressure

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Introduction

From a purely utilitarian perspective, the decision to vote is the result of a combination of expected costs and benefits. Yet the probability to affect the result is close to nil, and the expected benefit is infinitely small. According to this approach, people should not vote, yet most people attend the polls, which is known as the paradox of voting (Owen and Grofman 1984; Mueller 2003, Fiorina 1989; Grofman 1993). In order to solve this paradox, some scholars include a normative element, the “D” –for duty-term (Dowding, 2005).

The belief that voting is a citizen’s duty has been a major predictor of turnout since Campbell and colleagues noted in 1960 that turnout is 70 percentage points higher among those with a strong sense of duty than among those with none (Campbell et al., 1960: 105-106). Other scholars have agreed that this belief is a crucial, even overriding motivation, for most citizens when it comes to deciding whether to attend the polls or not (Riker & Ordeshook, 1968, Verba et al., 1995, Blais, 2000). This belief acts as an inner police, as an internalized motivation that leads dutiful citizens to vote to avoid internal sanctions such as guilt (Campbell 1982, Knack 1995, Blais 2000).

A less explored road regarding the normative conditionings of turnout stresses the role of social pressure. This research has shown that social connectedness and social sanctions (from disapproval to shaming) from friends, neighbors and acquaintances can make abstainers comply and attend the polling station (Denver 2008, Wolfinger & Wolfinger 2008, Goerres 2007, Campbell 1982, Knack 1995, Gerber et al. 2008).

Despite the close connection between both explanations (voting out of inner duty and voting because of social pressure), the relative role of these explanatory factors remains unknown to date. The few studies considering both types of considerations disagree about the link between duty and social pressure. For some, both are independent (Knack 1992), while others consider that social pressure only exerts an effect if the individual is already dutiful (Sinclair 2012:151; Schram and Van Winden 1991). Hence our research questions: are duty and social pressure independent forces on the decision to vote? Do they reinforce each other? Does social pressure have a different impact among those who feel that they have a moral obligation to vote and among those who do not?

We will address these questions with two datasets: the 2000 National Annenberg Election Study and a Canadian panel survey (2008-2009), both including questions about the duty to vote and the perceived social pressure from peers and family in case of not voting. We intend to fill the gap in the turnout literature by unraveling the relationship between two explanations that are usually not considered simultaneously.

Theoretical framework

Despite the nil possibility of effectively affecting the results, the dubious benefits derived from the action and the costs of voting, people keep on attending the polling stations. This is the well-known paradox of voting, for which the rational choice theory, as firstly elaborated by Downs (1957), does not have a convincing explanation. Among the interpretations of this apparent paradox, some authors suggest that a share of citizens take pleasure in expressing their views through voting (Fiorina 1976, Brennan & Hamlin 1998), while others suggest that citizens simply develop a habit of voting (Franklin 2004).

More convincingly, there is a research strand stressing the social and moral dimensions of voting, through adding a moral term in the voting utility function (Blais 2000, Blais & Achen 2010). According to this view, most citizens attend the polls because they abide by the social norm that voting is “good” and abstaining is “bad”. Hence, their decision is not based on the calculus of costs or benefits, but on their belief that it is their moral duty to vote. The internalization of such social norm is acquired early in life, and voters behave accordingly, voting in every election or at least feeling guilty when they can't. Guilt is indeed the signal of the successful internalization of the social norm that attending the polling station is expected from the good citizen (Dalton 2008). Guilt is also present in the first formulation of duty as a moral basis for the voting behaviour, brought by Riker and Ordeshook. They introduced a “D” term accounting for “the satisfaction from compliance with the ethic of voting, which if the citizen is at all socialized into the democratic tradition is positive when he votes and negative (from guilt) when he does not” (1968:28).

Yet the existence of a social norm signaling the virtues of voting also means that not everyone will abide by this norm, and that some may need a reminder or a sanction in order to feel compelled to comply. This is the stepping stone of the second interpretation that stresses the social aspects of turnout. This school of thought puts emphasis on the role of social pressure from peers, family and other members of the community in order to make deviant individuals (abstainers) comply with the social norm that voting is what is expected from them. This research strand has shown that those who believe that their friends or acquaintances would disapprove if they abstain are more likely to vote (Abrams et al. 2011). In the same vein, that weakening social ties (Knack 1992) or widowhood (Denver 2008, Wolfinger & Wolfinger 2008) foster abstention, as in these situations the individual is less likely to be held accountable before his or her community. Similarly, we know that older people are more likely to vote than the young in part because age increases social connectedness (Goerres 2007).

Hence, social sanctions, in the form of disapproval, ostracism or shame (Campbell 1982, Knack 1995), compel well-connected (rooted in their community) citizens to comply with the social norm that voting is a desirable behaviour. Experimental research has found that people can be persuaded to vote if they are threatened with revealing their deviant behaviour to their neighbors, making them comply in order to avoid social shame (Gerber et al. 2008).

Given that both interpretations (the one stressing the role of internal duty and the one stressing the role of external social pressure) rely on the presence of a social norm, it is surprising that no study has empirically addressed the interplay between both phenomena. Among the few scholars that have reflected about this connection, Knack suggests that external social sanctions may be able to drag people to the polling station regardless of their internalized sense of duty (Knack 1992). Yet other scholars argue that social pressure “enters the calculus of voting through a different component: the perception of civic duty” (Sinclair 2012:151). In other words, social pressure makes individuals aware of their social duties regarding voting, and triggers social conformity. According to this perspective, social pressure precedes and triggers duty; which would be a mediator for the effects of social pressure on the likelihood to vote. This is at odds with previous research on the nature of the duty to vote (Blais & Galais 2016, Galais & Blais 2014), which suggests that sense of civic duty is acquired at an early age and is not substantially affected by contextual factors. Another possibility is that duty triggers perceptions of social pressure. More precisely, those who subscribe to the social norm overestimate the amount of social pressure since they are prone to assume that everyone subscribes to that norm (see Scholz and Pinney 1995).

Finally, Schram and Winden (1991) posit that the impact of social pressure is conditional on pre-existing feelings of duty. More precisely, the dutiful would vote even in the absence of social pressure where those who do not subscribe to the norm would be more susceptible to the presence or absence of social sanctions. This is consistent with a moderation effect of duty on the relationship between social pressure and turnout; pressure having a greater effect when the feeling that voting is a duty is low or absent. Hence our research questions: do duty and social pressure have additional independent effects on the propensity to vote, does duty moderate the effect of social pressure, are social sanctions able to boost the belief that voting is a duty and, ultimately, increase the likelihood to vote, or is the reverse, that is, sense of civic duty provokes perceptions of social pressure, which both affect turnout? The present research addresses these questions.

Research Design

In order to unravel the relationship between duty, social sanctions and turnout, we make use of two datasets including indicators for these three factors. In the first place, we have selected the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), which examines a wide range of political attitudes about candidates and issues in American politics. The survey included 79,458 US respondents that were contacted (sometimes several times) along 14 months during the 2000 US presidential campaign and afterwards. We use the national cross-section survey for our purposes –and more precisely, the survey conducted between December 2000 and January 2001), given

that it was the only survey including at the same time indicators for duty, social pressure and turnout.¹

In order to tap the successful internalization of the belief that voting is a duty, we have chosen a question asking respondents whether they would feel guilty if they did not vote. As mentioned above, this emotion signals the internal discomfort that individuals experience when faced with the idea of not fulfilling their moral obligation..

According to the literature, social sanctions are meant to provoke shame among deviant individuals (see Funk, mimeo; Funk 2010; DellaVigna, List & Malmendier 2012). This is often induced with facial expressions of disapproval, ostracism and explicit conformity pressure (Campbell 1982). We therefore looked for indicators pointing at respondents' perceptions that their friends and relatives would disapprove their decision to abstain in an election. The operationalization of the main variables with the NAES survey is as follows:

- The indicator for **duty** was the following one: "Please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree: If I do not vote, I feel guilty".²
- In order to tap **social pressure** we used the following question: "Please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree: If I do not vote, my family and friends are disappointed in me."
- As for the operationalization of the **dependent** variable, we used the following question: "In talking with people about politics and elections, we often find that they do not get a chance to vote. Did you happen to vote in the November election?"

In order to increase the external validity of our research, we also included Canada in our study. We use the 2008-2009 Quebec and British Columbia YouGov Polimetrix two-wave survey conducted at the time of the federal and provincial elections in these two provinces.

For the first wave in October 2008, YouGov Polimetrix interviewed a representative sample of 2,072 electors from Quebec and 2,037 electors from British Columbia. For the second wave of the Quebec survey in November and December of 2008 (at the time of the Quebec provincial election), 1,187 of the Wave 1 respondents were re-interviewed. For the second wave of the British Columbia survey in April and May of 2009 (at the time of the BC provincial election), 990 Wave 1 respondents were re-interviewed.

¹ 58,373 randomly selected adult US residents were interviewed for the national cross-section study, inclusive of the 48 continental states and Washington, DC. Interviewing was conducted daily 14 Dec 99–19 Jan 01, representing the period just before the height of the presidential primary campaign through the day before Bush's inauguration.

² Some cross-sectional surveys of the NAES study included a somewhat more direct question for duty: "When you vote do you usually get a feeling of satisfaction from it, or do you only do it because it's your duty?". We did not use it because the questionnaires featuring this duty question did not include questions on social pressure and/or past voting behaviour.

Although there were several indicators of **duty** available, we selected a “guilt” question for the sake of comparability with the ANES 2000 survey. The question states: “Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements: I would feel guilty if I did not vote in an election.”

The question tapping **social pressure** goes: Do you think that most of your friends and relatives care whether you vote or not? They care a lot/ They care somewhat /They care a little / They do not care at all. The question included a non response (I have no idea) option.

While both the duty and the pressure questions were asked in both waves of the panel study, only the second wave included a retrospective question on turnout in the 2008 federal election. The question stated: “Did you vote in the last federal election, in October 2008?” and the response options were Yes, No and “I don’t remember”. The panel structure of the Canadian study allows us to make the most of the data for the sake of causality, namely estimating the effect of independent variables measured at t-1 on the effect of reported vote measured at t+1.

The format of our dependent variable defines the statistical technique used to estimate them: a series of logistic regressions. We will control the effects of social pressure and internalized duty (operationalized as the feeling of guilt) by several explanatory factors that previous works have highlighted as antecedents of turnout (see, for instance, Blais 2000). These controls include sex, age, education, strength of party ID, religiosity, interest in politics and SES (tapped using household income).³ All the independent variables have been recoded so as to range between 0 and 1 for the sake of comparability of their effects. Hence, the coefficients should be read as the effect of a variable on voting when this variable changes its value from its minimum to its maximum. Additional predicted probabilities are facilitated in order to interpret these results.

The models will test four possible scenarios: a) a situation in which both social pressure and duty independently affect turnout, b) a situation in which duty moderates the effect of social pressure, c) the situation in which the effect of social pressure travels “through” duty (mediation effect of duty); and d) a situation in which the effect of duty is mediated through social pressure (mediation effect of pressure).

³ For the US estimations, religiosity is measured using the frequency of attendance to religious services. The variable has five categories ranging from “never” (0) to “more than once a week (1). Strength of party ID has two categories: “strong” (1) and “not very strong” (0). Those who do not know or did not answer have been assigned to the zero category. Education considers eight categories, from “grade eight or lower” to “graduate or professional degree”. A proxy has been employed in order to tap interest in politics, and it is “interest in government”. It is a four-category variable which ranges from “hardly” (0) to “most of the time”(1). Finally, household income is a nine-category variable ranging from “less than \$10,000” (coded as 0) to “\$150,000 or more” (1). In the Canadian estimations, religiosity is also tapped through the frequency of attendance to religious services, which ranges from “never”(0) to “once a week or more”(1). Education corresponds to the highest level of education attained and has 10 categories, from “some elementary school” (0) to “completed MA or PhD” (1). Strength of party ID refers to federal parties. Household annual income has 6 categories ranging from “less than \$20,000” to “over \$100,000”.

While the empirical test that would signal the existence of a moderation relationship is a significant interaction between social pressure and duty, we will test mediation following a classical Baron & Kenny approach (1986). According to these authors, we will introduce the variables stepwise (first the independent variable, then the alleged mediator), and check for any reduction in the effect of the independent variable.

Results

Table 1 depicts the descriptive statistics for our main variables in both the US and Canada. Both samples differ in several ways: Canadians have a greater tendency to vote and attain higher levels of education; while Americans are more attached to their parties, more religious, interested in politics, and have a greater tendency to feel pressured to vote by their social environment and to feel guilty if they don't attend the polling station.

Table 1. Descriptive of the main variables

Variable	Obs		Mean		Std. Dev.	
	US	Canada	Us	Canada	US	Canada
Vote	7004	1980	.76	.88	.43	.32
female	7017	2177	.56	.46	.50	.50
Age	6960	2176	.35	.41	.21	.23
Education	6968	2177	.52	.62	.29	.22
Strength of party ID	7017	2163	.45	.21	.50	.22
Religiosity	6940	2176	.50	.27	.33	.25
Interest (gov/federal politics)	6976	2177	.70	.64	.31	.30
Household income	6192	2172	.50	.43	.26	.29
Social pressure	4331	2174	.48	.35	.40	.36
Social pressure (w2)		1823	-	.36	-	.35
Guilt	4433	2168	.68	.63	.39	.32
Guilt (w2)	-	2112	-	.62	-	.32

Table 2 shows the Pearson correlations for the main variables of this study in both the US and Canada. All variables are, indeed, significantly and positively correlated, but with Pearson coefficients under 0.4.⁴ The exception is the correlation between social pressure and guilt in the US survey (0.44), and the variables for which we have measures in both the first and the second wave of the Canadian panel survey (0.64; 0.49). The conclusion is that we are not in a situation that can provoke any serious collinearity in our estimations. Also, this evidence suggest that these variables might

⁴ Note that positive and significant statistical relationships between the three variables are also a precondition in order to test a mediation scenario (Baron & Kenny 1986).

be related, but not to the extent that they can be considered indicators of the same dimension or concept.

Table 2: Correlations between the main variables in this study

	United States			Canada				
	Vote	Social pressure	Guilt	Vote	Soc. pressure w1	Soc. pressure w2	Guilt w1	Guilt w2
Vote	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
Soc.Pressure w1	.20*	1	-	.15*	1	-	-	-
Soc.Pressure w2	-	-	-	.17*	.49*	1	-	-
Guilt w1	.3*	.44*	1	.39*	.3*	.26*	1	-
Guilt w2	-	-	-	.4*	.26*	.27*	.64*	1

*Indicates when the Pearson coefficient is significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table 3 presents the results of four logistic estimation models predicting turnout in the 2000 US election. The first two columns test the effect of our social pressure and guilt indicators, respectively. The third column considers both indicators at once, and the last model test the possibility that duty moderates the effect of social pressure by means of an interaction.

All models confirm the expected effects of the controls, except for sex. Age, education, strength of party ID, church attendance, interest in government affairs and income have a positive, significant effect on the likelihood to turnout. Social pressure (model 1) and Guilt (model 2) also have a positive, significant effect on the probability to vote that seems, at first glance, stronger for guilt. This is confirmed when both social pressure and guilt are considered at once: the effect of guilt is more than twice the effect of the hypothetical disapproval that the respondent would experience if he or she failed to vote in the election (model 3). Model 3 tests the possibility of a mediation role for guilt or for pressure if we compare its results to model 1 or 2, respectively. Although this is a rough approach, both situations seem plausible, albeit the loss in the strength of its effect is more remarkable for social pressure when we consider guilt. This is consistent with a situation in which social pressure precedes (and causes) guilt, ultimately increasing the likelihood to vote.

The fourth and last estimation tests the possibility that guilt moderates the effect of social pressure respondents' social networks disapproval if he or she abstained in an election. We would expect a negative interaction effect, that is, the impact of social sanctions should be weaker among those with a strong sense of duty. As can be seen in column 4 there is no evidence of such interaction effect.

Table 3: Logistic estimation of turnout(2000). US.

	(1) Social pressure	(2) Guilt	(3) Pressure and guilt	(4) Moderation
Female	.145 (.089)	.079 (.090)	.091 (.091)	.090 (.091)
Age	2.58*** (.238)	2.55*** (.236)	2.46*** (.242)	2.46*** (.243)
Education	1.682*** (.187)	1.645*** (.186)	1.624*** (.189)	1.625*** (.190)
Strength party ID	.546*** (.092)	.514*** (.092)	.506*** (.093)	.505*** (.093)
Religiosity	.595*** (.136)	.558*** (.136)	.543*** (.138)	.543*** (.138)
Interest in government	1.133*** (.143)	.942*** (.145)	.944*** (.147)	.942*** (.147)
Income	1.872*** (.196)	1.842*** (.196)	1.855*** (.200)	1.855*** (.200)
Social pressure	.775*** (.113)		.404** (.125)	.348 (.235)
Guilt		1.068*** (.109)	.920*** (.121)	.893*** (.153)
Social pressure # guilt				.085 (.301)
Pseudo R-Squared	.209	.221	.223	.223
N	3811	3882	3759	3759

Standard errors in parentheses. + p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

The predicted probabilities for model 3 (not shown) confirm the greater effect of guilt on turnout, as compared to social pressure. Going from no guilt to its maximum value implies moving from a 68% likelihood of voting to a 82% likelihood of voting. Conversely, individuals not experiencing any social disapproval when abstaining still have a 74 % chance to vote, all else kept equal and at its actual values. When social pressure is at its maximum value the likelihood to vote increases to 80%. This effect is significant but is clearly weaker than that of duty.

Table 4 replicates these tests for Canada. Control variables follow a similar pattern than in the US with some exceptions: age seems more relevant in Canada, church attendance has no effect, and the strength of party ID or income seem to be less explicative of turnout than in the US.

Table 4. logistic estimation of past voting behaviour (Federal 2008 elections). Canada.

	(1) Social pressure	(2) Guilt	(3) Pressure (w1) and guilt (w1)	(4) Media- tion. Pressure (w1) and guilt (w2)	(5) Media- tion. Pressure (w2) and guilt (w1)	(6) Mode- ration
Female	.24 (.16)	.09 (.17)	.09 (.17)	.15 (.17)	.18 (.18)	.09 (.17)
Age	2.87** (.41)	2.84** (.44)	2.86** (.44)	2.73** (.44)	2.8*** (.47)	2.87** (.44)
Education	1.33** (.39)	1.27* (.42)	1.25* (.42)	.93* (.42)	1.06* (.44)	1.25* (.42)
Strength party ID	.79* (.35)	.68+ (.37)	.68+ (.37)	.65+ (.37)	.56 (.39)	.68+ (.37)
Religiosity	.32 (.28)	.19 (.30)	.19 (.30)	.23 (.30)	.14 (.32)	.19 (.30)
Interest in Federal politics	2.16** (.28)	1.08** (.30)	1.01** (.31)	1.26** (.30)	1.03** (.32)	1.02** (.31)
Income	.80* (.28)	.73* (.29)	.72* (.29)	.76* (.30)	.73* (.31)	.72* (.29)
Province= Quebec	-.22 (.16)	-.15 (.17)	-.16 (.17)	-.26 (.17)	-.16 (.18)	-.16 (.17)
Social pressure (w1)	1.04** (.26)		.34 (.28)	.56* (.28)		.22 (.49)
Social pressure (w2)					.90* (.30)	
Guilt (w1)		3.48** (.30)	3.40** (.31)		3.40*** (.32)	3.33** (.38)
Guilt (w2)				1.14** (.10)		
Soc.pressure (w1)#Guilt (w1)						.26 (.90)
Pseudo R-Squared	.184	.286	.287	.299	.298	.287
N	1958	1951	1949	1958	1773	1949

Standard errors in parentheses. + p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

The coefficients for social pressure (model 1) and guilt (model 2) seem to point to a greater effect than in the US. One finding, however, replicates the US models: the non-significant interaction presented in the last column of the table rules out the possibility that any moderation relationship exists between social pressure and internalized duty.

Model 3 tests the possibility of independence between both social factors. Remarkably, when we take into account both guilt and social pressure measured in the same wave, the effect of the latter disappears. The model suggests that pressure has no direct effect on turnout once controlled by guilt measured at the same time. This could be for two reasons. The first is that pressure triggers duty which in turn affects turnout. The second is that duty creates perceptions of pressure but that these perceptions have no impact at all on turnout. We are in no position to determine which interpretation is the correct one. The next two models try to shed some light on the causal patterns relating pressure, guilt and turnout by measuring the plausible

mediator in the panel wave following (w2) the measure of the independent variable (w1).

Model 4 tests the possibility that social pressure in fact precedes and causes to a certain extent the feeling of guilt (internalized duty). For this purpose, social pressure is measured in wave 1 and guilt in wave 2. We observe that both variables reach statistical significance and, what is more important, that the coefficient for social pressure is halved if we compare it with model 1. This is consistent with a scenario of partial mediation, pressure boosting both the belief that voting is a duty and turnout.

Model 5 tests for an alternative scenario in which duty precedes the perception that the individual's social environment will be disappointed in him if he abstained in an election. Hence, guilt is measured in wave 1 and the perception of social pressure in wave 2. Both variables reach statistical significance and have a remarkable, positive effect on turnout. But, most importantly, the coefficient for guilt (as compared to the one obtained in model 2) is practically unaltered by the introduction of social pressure. Hence, the possibility that pressure mediates the effect of guilt (model 4) seems less plausible than the opposite. Note as well that models 4 and 5 achieve the best model fits in this table, suggesting that a mediation scenario is the one that best describes our data. As model 4 gets a slightly better results on this respect and the effect of X (social pressure, w1) is clearly reduced when introducing the plausible mediator (guilt), this suggests that probably guilt mediates the effect of social pressure and not the other way around.

The predicted probabilities for the conjoint effects of guilt and pressure measured at the same time (model 3) confirm the greater effect of internalized duty. An individual feeling no guilt when abstaining has a 66% chances of voting, all else kept equal (and at its actual values). An individual experiencing a great deal of guilt if abstaining would have a 98% chance of voting. Contrarily, when an individual does not experience any social pressure when abstaining, its likelihood to turnout is 88%, and only increases 2 percentage points (up to 90%) when this pressure is extreme.

Conclusions

In spite of the expanding literature including social aspects in the voting equation, very few studies have considered both the inner moral compels to cast a vote and the social pressures that the individual feel in the event of an election. Virtually no study has addressed the interplay between internalized duty (guilt) and social pressure when it comes to voting. This research has faced the challenge testing all the possible scenarios that the scant literature on this respect suggests: independence of both factors, moderation and mediation.

Our results yield some evidence in favor of the independence hypotheses, but mostly seem to point to a scenario in which previous social pressure (or, more accurately, perceptions or fear of social pressure if the individual abstained) is able to boost to a certain extent the belief that voting is a duty. Both variables would therefore exert a positive effect on the likelihood of voting, although some of the social pressure effect

would travel through duty. This opens the door to consider duty a life-long developing attitude, able to change in later stages of life as a consequence of special political contexts (elections) and social sanctions. Further research should explore the life-long dynamics of this attitude and analyze the interplay between turnout, duty and social pressure beyond the two case studies addressed here. Indeed, duty has a clear cultural component that might affect to what extent it is able to be enhanced by an appropriate social environment during adulthood. It is possible, for instance, that societies in which this attribute is less required and observed in politically engaged citizens duty develops later in life –with the help of some social sanctions- than in countries where this is stressed by authorities and institutions from a very early age.

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