TAKING CIVIC DUTY SERIOUSLY:

POLITICAL THEORY AND VOTER TURNOUT

André Blais
Department of Political Science
University of Montreal

Christopher H. Achen
Politics Department
Princeton University

Boss Frank Hague of Jersey City on voter turnout:

"According to reformers, the average American can hardly wait for election day so he can exercise the sovereign right that the forefathers bought with their blood. That's another laugh. A full fifty per cent of the voters have got to be coaxed or dragged to the polls."

Chicago alderman, 1923
(quoted in Merriam and Gosnell, 1924)

"Indifference is undoubtedly the greatest cause of non-voting….A dull election, in which there is nothing of the dramatic, does not interest them….In the twenty years that I have lived in Chicago, I do not recall a single animated street-corner conversation on politics between men who were not directly interested. About the only thing which has even stirred the indifferent voter slightly is the prohibition question [banning alcohol]."

Hence Standard Poli Sci View

- People vote if they are:

1. Mobilized

   or

2. Have a strong preference (for a candidate, party, or alcohol)

- The second of these is journalists' standard approach to talking about turnout-- "expressive voting."

But another factor makes a stealthy appearance in voter interviews

- A young female persistent non-voter on the North Side of Chicago in the Twenties (Merriam and Gosnell):

"Some people may say that I am not patriotic, that I am not fulfilling my duties as a citizen by not voting, but I don't care."

- The other 50% of Jersey City voters, who did NOT have to be coaxed or dragged to the polls.

Scholarly neglect of civic duty

- From the beginning, very little attention to civic duty in turnout.
- Merriam and Gosnell do not discuss civic duty except in one prepositional phrase, where it is grouped with other aspects of citizenship.
- Tingsten (1937) does not mention it.
- Both the Columbia and the Michigan schools discovered that it correlated very powerfully with turnout, but they relegated discussion to brief asides or appendices.
- Many current statistical models omit it entirely.
- The history in rational choice theorizing is similar.

Neglecting civic duty has been easy

- To empiricists, it is just another attitude.
- To most rational choice theorists, it is a not a self-interested motivation, and therefore not interesting.
- To journalists, it generates levels but not changes, and levels are not news.
- So we forget about it.
- But if you go to America (or any other country) and speak with the natives, you hear something else.

What do the citizens say?

- In most surveys, heavy majorities of Americans say they have a duty to vote and feel guilty when they do not, including about half of those who did not vote at a given election.

- Canada and Britain are even higher on duty; Japan is *very* high.

- Taiwan duty data from 2010: about ¾ express a sense of duty.

- Hank Farber finds that even in union certification elections with tiny numbers of voters, so that pivotal probabilities are substantial, 80% of the voters ignore those probabilities and just vote.

What do various authorities say?

- U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services: "the right to vote is a duty as well as a privilege."
- "a right and a duty" language is common in treatments of democratic citizenship around the world
- Fully 29 countries have constitutions that make voting mandatory. Eight more say that voting is a duty.

In contrast to empirical and formal researchers, political theorists have a rich literature

- Kant's famous "categorical imperative": What if everyone did that? (Confucianism, too? See Hur 2011.)
- Duty makes you do what you otherwise would have no inclination to do.
- Philosophers discuss whether any such "deontological" ethical imperative holds.
- Most say duty to vote exists: One has obligations (or even causal responsibility) even when one's vote is not pivotal.
- If so, duty and expressiveness do not "trade off" like two consumption goods. "Duty" is not just another consumption benefit.
- Instead, when present, duty has "lexicographic" priority.

How to Misunderstand Duty

- Because duty is not an attitude or a consumption benefit, duty is not B ("benefits") in the Riker-Ordeshook equation.

- Utilitarianism or altruism means adding other people's benefits to your benefits when you think about voting.

- That would implying adding D to a turnout equation, as Riker and Ordeshook did. But that is consequentialist thinking—another kind of benefit. It's not Kantian duty.

- Hence none of those ideas takes "civic duty" seriously, and in that sense, none of them takes seriously the ethical commitments of many voters.

A turnout model taking political theory seriously

- People vote if they have EITHER deontological OR expressive reasons:

a) They vote if they feel a duty to vote, or if not, then

b) If they feel strongly enough about the outcome to overcome costs.

Comparative Statics

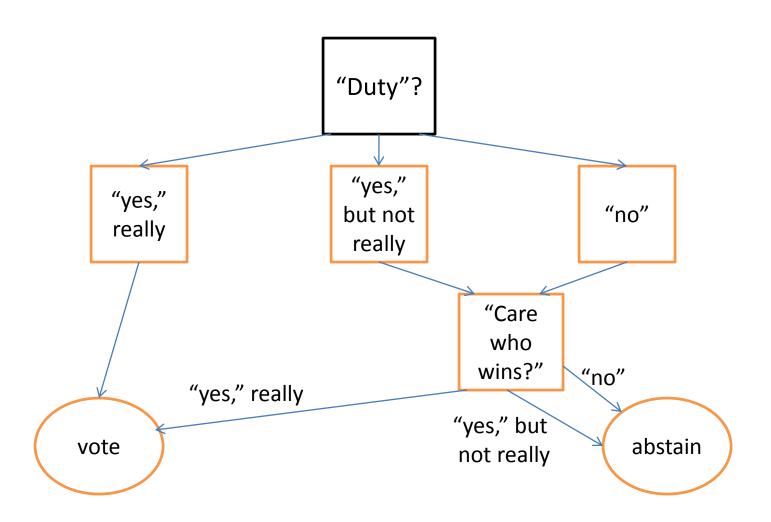- Key implication of this story for our purposes: expressive benefits matter less for those who express a sense of duty. So do costs.

- E.g., Knack (1994) finds that rain depresses the turnout of low-duty citizens more. This is intuitively sensible, but until now, all our models have assumed no difference (i.e., linearity on a probit scale).

- We show that Knack's kind of result is quite general in the data.

Coping with survey measures

- Some people say they believe strongly in duty to vote,

a) But they don't mean it, or:

b) they do mean it but aren't very good at carrying out their intentions ("neglect" in Merriam and Gosnell)

- They have a sick child or dying relative, etc.

- And similarly with caring about the outcome: Not everyone who says they care really does care.

Duty, Preference, Surveys, and Vote

Getting to a model

- So we need error terms for two reasons: (1) we can't measure strength of preference perfectly, and (2) some people say "duty" but don't really mean it.

- We model probabilities with probit equations.

- Under an independence assumption about the probabilities, this leads to the following:

The setup

- Let the citizen's true value of duty be denoted d_v, and set $d_v = 1$ if duty is present, and 0 otherwise. Let w_v be the citizen's expressive utility for voting net of the cost. Set $y_i = 1$ if the citizen chooses to vote, and 0 otherwise, and let x be a vector of covariates influencing expressive utilities and costs but not duty. Denote expressed duty in the survey with a "hat."

The statistical logic

$$\Pr(y_i = 0 \mid d_v, x) = \Pr(d_v = 0 \mid d_v)\Pr(w_v = 0 \mid x)$$

$$\Pr(y_i = 1 \mid d_v, x) = 1 - \Pr(d_v = 0 \mid d_v)\Pr(w_v = 0 \mid x) \quad \#$$

Today's agenda

- This model requires some special MLE programming: it's not a standard package like probit or logit.

- However, one can show that the model is closely approximated by an ordinary probit setup with duty, preference, and an interaction term—preference X duty.

- We show both below.

The Data

- We have two YouGov/Polimetrix Internet panels for 2008 national elections, one U.S. (5 waves) and one Canada (two waves).

- Various issues of representativeness, weighting, etc.

- But our results also hold in standard ANES data from the Eighties with validated vote.

- Need to account for social desirability in duty question. We can use the model to estimate how many Americans really mean it when they say they have strong duty, for example. (It turns out to be about 3 out of 4.)

New duty question in both countries

- *Different people feel differently about voting. For some, voting is a DUTY. They feel that they should vote in every election however they feel about the candidates and parties.*

-

- *For others, voting is a CHOICE. They feel free to vote or not to vote in an election depending on how they feel about the candidates and parties. [The order of these two statements was varied randomly.]*

-

- *For you personally, voting is FIRST AND FOREMOST a:*
- *1   Duty*
- *2   Choice*
- *9   Not sure*

-

- *[If respondent chose "Duty"] How strongly do you feel personally that voting is a duty?*
- *1   Very strongly*
- *2   Somewhat strongly*
- *3   Not very strongly*

U.S. Sample Description

Table 1: Duty and Preference Distribution in the 2008 American Sample
         (weighted percent of the total sample)

	Duty none	Duty weak, some	Duty strong
Pref little, weak	9	1	1
Pref somewhat	10	2	3
Pref a lot	31	13	31
unweighted N = 978	50	15	35

Do Duty and Preference Predict? Yes, gangbusters.

Table 2: Percent Turnout by Duty and Preference in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election (weighted)

	Duty none	Duty weak, some	Duty strong
Pref little, weak	16	16	81
Pref somewhat	49	91	90
Pref a lot	73	84	92

unweighted N = 897

Table 3: Alternate Models of Turnout in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election (weighted)
Coefficients with standard errors in parentheses

	probit	probit	Eq. (2)	probit
Preference	2.26***	1.91***	2.16***	2.19***
	(0.31)	(0.30)	(0.36)	(0.38)
Duty		.89***	3.14*	2.05***
		(0.25)	(1.67)	(0.64)
PrefxDuty				-1.29*
				(0.76)
Constant	-1.28***	-1.31***		-1.54***
	(.25)	(.24)		(.29)
From Eq. 2:				
Pref. Const.			-1.50***	
			(.30)	
Duty Const.			-2.53	
			(1.66)	
log pseudo-likelihood	-412.8	-384.1	-382.16	-381.28

***significant at .01 **significant at .05 *significant at .10. Preference is measured in October and duty in January, both 2008. Unweighted N for all specifications is 897.

Lots of checking

- Does pattern of lower responsiveness to expressive concerns in high-duty respondents fail in subsets of the data?
- Would a different power of the interaction work better?
- Are the variables coded improperly, so that the effect of Care is nonlinear when Duty = 0, or vice-versa? I.e., is miscoding causing the interaction?
- Would a full Taylor-series expansion with quadratic terms be better? Is mis-specification causing the interaction?
- The answer to all these questions is: No.

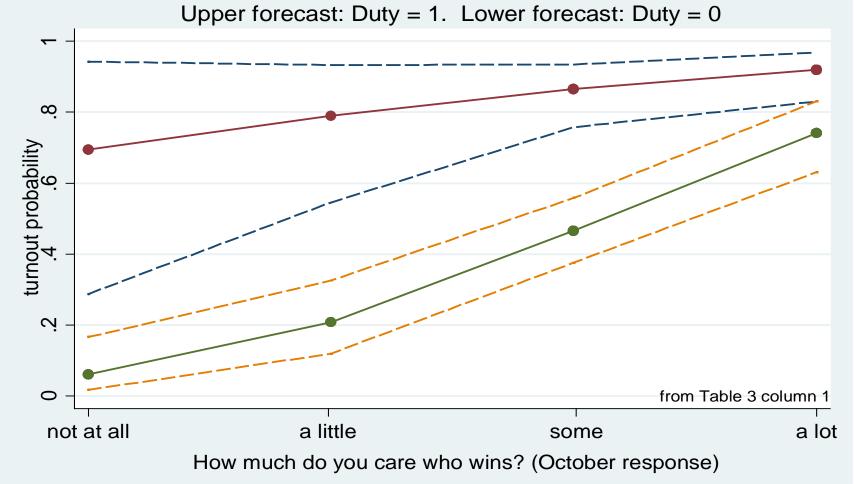Fig 1. U.S. 2008 Turnout Forecasts and 95% Error Bounds
Upper forecast: Duty = 1. Lower forecast: Duty = 0

from Table 3 column 1

turnout probability

How much do you care who wins? (October response)

not at all   a little   some   a lot

Table 4: Probit Models of Turnout in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election (weighted)

	Pref Oct Duty Jan b/se	Pref Oct Duty Oct b/se	Pref Jan Duty Jan b/se	Pref & Interest Oct Duty Jan; PID str Dec 07 b/se
Preference	2.19***	2.18***	1.80***	1.95***
	(0.38)	(0.38)	(0.34)	(0.43)
Duty	2.05***	3.71***	3.03***	2.41***
	(0.64)	(0.71)	(1.10)	(0.76)
PrefxDuty	-1.29*	-2.57***	-2.44**	-1.83**
	(0.76)	(0.84)	(1.17)	(0.86)
Age				3.96**
				(1.85)
Age^2				-4.13*
				(2.18)
Education				1.32***
				(0.47)
Interest				0.45*
				(0.27)
PID strength				0.89***
				(0.32)
constant	-1.54***	-1.77***	-1.24***	-3.34***
	(.29)	(.30)	(.26)	(0.53)
unweighted N	897	896	1049	839

***significant at .01 **significant at .05 *significant at .10

Canada sample description

Table 5: Duty and Preference Distribution in the 2008 Canadian Sample
        (weighted percent of the total sample)

	Duty none	Duty weak, some	Duty strong
Pref little, weak	21	10	2
Pref somewhat	10	8	10
Pref a lot	9	6	24
unweighted N = 2175	40	24	36

Duty, Preference and Vote in Canada

Percent Turnout by Duty and Preference in the 2008 Canadian Federal Election (weighted)

	Duty none	Duty weak, some	Duty strong
Pref little, weak	17	52	71
Pref somewhat	41	76	79
Pref a lot	76	88	92

unweighted N = 1750

Probit Models of Reported Turnout in the 2008 Canadian Election (B.C. and Quebec)
S.I. = single indicators of preference and duty. M.I. = multiple indicators.)

	S.I. vote	S.I. vote
Preference	1.89***	1.58***
	(0.14)	(0.16)
Duty	1.49***	1.43***
	(0.20)	(0.20)
Pref x Duty	-.68**	-0.60**
	(0.26)	(0.28)
Age		0.04**
		(0.01)
Age^2		0.00
		(0.00)
Education		0.99***
		(0.21)
Interest		0.25*
		(0.14)
PID strength		0.19*
		(0.11)
Cut 1 /cons.	-1.29***	-3.36***
	(.09)	(0.36)
unweighted N	*1978*	*1963*

***significant at .01 **significant at .05 *significant at .10

Is Duty Really Causal? Or Just Correlated with Something that Is?

- For some purposes, don't care. It predicts powerfully.

- But we also consider causality. Is duty really vote intention? Or a proxy for something else?

- First, our panel data give evidence that it's not vote intention driving duty: In ANES panels, only 4% net of respondents who voted in one presidential year and not the other changed their response to the duty question to match their turnout decision.

Hard to explain away

- The other standard, well known, and powerful turnout variables don't dent it.

- It's not Internet samples or reported vote: same findings in ANES Eighties face-to-face surveys with validated vote.

- This is why many people SAY they vote.

→So if you don't believe our story, you have lots of explanatory work to do.

Conclusions

- Duty matters in turnout, but not in the way we thought (and mostly forgot about).
- Why have we been so unsophisticated in political behavior? We not only missed the very first things voters say, but we also sound foolish about political theory.
- Why hasn't the intense conversation in political theory reached formal theorists and empiricists?
- Demonstrates the costs of the subfield "separate tables" Almond warned us of.
- A challenge: Managing the growing need for specialization while keeping the discipline's intellectual range.