

Interests, Parties, and Social Embeddedness: Why Rational People Vote

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1. Introduction

After five decades of research the answers to two questions that are critical to our understanding of democracy are still incomplete. The first is why some people acquire costly information about politics when we would expect them to be “rationally ignorant.” The second is why people vote when we would expect them to “rationally abstain.” Both were originally identified by Downs (1957) and spring from the fact that individuals are rarely able to affect the outcome of an election.

Informed and participating citizens are the bread and butter of democratic politics, and they are critical for many of our models of politics. People who are reasonably well informed about their own interests are necessary for stable political competition, and nearly all political economy models assumes a link between economic interests and political behavior. Why people tend to be better informed and participate more frequently than simple rational choice models would allow therefore continues to be of great practical and theoretical importance.

Past attempts in the rational choice tradition to solve the participation and information puzzles have emphasized the importance of non-instrumental incentives, such as duty or expression of partisan support. But as Barry (1970) reminds us, this simply shifts the explanatory task to why people get pleasure out of expressing their partisan allegiances or why they feel a duty to vote. It also does not explain why some people accumulate substantial amounts of “useless” political information.

The failure to explain voting and political knowledge at the individual level has also confounded attempts to explain well-established empirical patterns observed at the macro level. For example, close elections are consistently found to increase voter turnout, yet the closeness of elections would rarely significantly affect the individual calculus of voting (Aldrich 1993). Likewise, comparativists have documented that national political institutions, especially the nature of the electoral system, systematically affect turnout (Franklin 1996; Lijphart 1999). But, again, there are no obvious reasons why such institutions should alter the individual calculus of voting in any significant way. For example, while the probability of changing a single seat under proportional representation may be greater than tipping the balance between two candidates in a majoritarian election, the chance is still miniscule, and the policy impact of a seat change would be proportionally smaller.

Notwithstanding the many failed attempts to explain voting and political knowledge within a rational choice framework, we want to explore yet another. What we propose is a reconceptualization of the rational choices people make when they decide whether to vote or inform themselves about politics. People do not acquire information and go to the polls, we argue, because they are particularly dutiful or because they are fooled into thinking their vote matters. Rather, they do so because such behavior is sometimes an important source of respect and standing in the groups and networks to which people belong. This is an idea that has recently attracted attention in economic theory (Brenner and Pettit 2004), and it has a long pedigree in sociology. Still, it has not been incorporated into a rational choice understanding of voter turnout and political knowledge acquisition.

Our story does not end at the individual level. For social interactions to play the role we propose – for politics to become a marker for group standing – there must be a minimum of interest homogeneity as well as common knowledge about those interests. Political elites, through party organizations and interest groups, play a critical role in inducing such common knowledge. In turn, the incentives and effectiveness of elites vary with the closeness of elections as well as with the design of political institutions.

We test our argument on a new mass survey of American voters, which was designed specifically for this purpose. But we begin the paper with a critical assessment of the literature before proposing a model that will guide the empirical analysis. The conclusion suggests how our argument can be applied to the comparative study of voter turnout.

2. The calculus of voting

One of the most intriguing facts about voting is that the act itself produces no tangible benefits to the individual, yet it is of great value to those who get to run the government and is ultimately a precondition for democracy. From the perspective of the individual, voting is utterly trivial and rarely worth the effort if measured by policy impact. For the same reason, there is little reason for people to seek information about the candidates or about the issues that divide them. People are rationally disposed to abstain and to be ignorant. By contrast, from the perspective of politicians, or the groups that stand to benefit from public policies, voting and political knowledge are of critical importance. It decides who wins and loses the election, and (to use Lasswells's definition of politics) who gets what, when, and how.

Several attempts in the rational choice literature to explain voting seek to link the national importance of voting to the individual calculus of voting. In the original formulation of the citizen duty term, Downs (1957) suggested that the survival of democracy was such an important and noble cause that many individuals would feel obligated to go to the polls. In Riker and Ordeshook's (1968) formalization, the fact that the costs of voting (C) usually outweighs the expected policy benefits (which is the probability of making or breaking a tie times the policy difference between candidates, or PB) is made up for by a positive "duty" term. So the calculus is $PB - C + D$. Yet, since the survival of democracy is a pure public good, it is clearly problematic to explain individual rational behavior as a result of people being concerned with providing that good.¹

Partly in recognition of this problem, the interpretation of the D -term has widened to include "expressive" benefits such as showing allegiance to a party (Fiorina 1976) or even just the excitement of participating. But as Barry (1970) rightly points out, while these

¹ Another potential solution focuses on the strategic interaction between voters. If voters treat the probability of winning as endogenous, perhaps positive voter turnout can be sustained in equilibrium (Ledyard 1984; Palfrey and Rosenthal 1983). As it turns out, however, as the size of the electorate increases the turnout rate that can be sustained in equilibrium goes to zero, and in effect we are back to the original puzzle (Palfrey and Rosenthal 1985; Grofman 1984). In fact, it turns out that the decision-theoretic formulation is a pretty good representation of the choice faced by voters in large elections (Aldrich 1992). Further studies building on rational choice tend to reconceptualize particular terms (Blais, 1992) or look at strategic voting in light of larger voting systems (Feddersen, 1992)

influences on individual voting are entirely plausible, if people vote because they derive utility from the act of voting, voting becomes a matter of taste. And since rational choice takes tastes as given, it has nothing to offer.² For rational choice to provide any explanatory leverage, voting must be conceived as an investment in a desirable outcome. We agree, but argue that the investment is not in a desirable election outcome, but in rewarding relationships with other people.

Understanding voting as an investment in election outcomes still makes good sense at the elite level. If organized groups, as collective actors, have some electoral clout, it can be used to produce public policies that are beneficial to their members. If the total value of those policies is greater than the total costs of each member voting, it raises the possibility that groups can use selective incentives to induce members to vote (Morton 1987; Uhlaner 1989a, 1989b, 1991) A vexing issue in this conception, however, is the exact nature of these selective incentives. Although outright vote buying is common in quasi-democratic settings, in advanced democracies people rarely (if ever) receive benefits that are contingent on their vote. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) makes the more plausible argument that politicians can reduce the costs of voting by driving people to the polls on election day and providing them with cheap information. But it is hard to imagine that the effort of elites to reduce the costs of voting is what brings the majority of people to the voting booth. Still, the idea that groups have an incentive to mobilize voters by providing selective incentives is an important one that we build on below.

Another promising attempt to link the national and individual levels is offered by Aldrich (1993). Aldrich argues that precisely because voting is such a trivial act for the individual, but such a crucial one for politicians, the latter will invest heavily in convincing people that their vote really does matter or that their expression of partisan allegiance is worth their trouble. The argument is remarkable for the attempt to link the behavior of politicians directly to the calculus of individuals, but it is hard to escape the conclusion that people are fooled into voting by shrewd politicians. In Aldrich's model, rational ignorance is turned into a (mild) form of irrationality, and irrationality is rarely a very interesting explanatory category. It also does not comport well with the fact that the best educated and informed people are also the ones most likely to vote. Indeed, the strategic politicians model explains one puzzle, voter turnout, by assuming away another one: why so many voters are in fact well-informed about politics.

Common for all rational choice approaches is that they fail to provide much leverage on explaining variance in voter turnout across countries. While there is some evidence that the costs of voting (such as registration requirements) have an effect, differences in costs explain at best a small portion of the variance (Franklin 2000). The strongest cross-national

² The minimax regret solution proposed by Ferejohn and Fiorina (1975) avoids the Barry critique by invoking incomplete information. The calculus of voting, if generalized, cannot yield a definitive answer about the level of voter turnout since if all people reach the conclusion that their vote makes no difference, then a single vote could decide the election, and then the conclusion would be wrong. The model has largely been abandoned for its lack of realism, but it does highlight the need to somehow link the macro-level importance of elections to the behavior of individuals.

predictor of turnout is instead the electoral system, and it is tempting to argue that this is because proportional representation “makes every vote count” (Franklin 1996). But what matters in rational choice models is the probability of changing the electoral outcome *times* the policy impact, and while the probability of changing a single seat under pure PR is greater than tipping the balance between two candidates in a majoritarian election (even if it is still miniscule), the policy impact of the seat change will also be proportionally smaller. Like the strategic politicians argument, the institutional argument is lacking a clear-cut mechanism at the level of individual voters.

3. Sociological Approaches

Most work on the sociological basis of political behavior focuses on the role that membership in demographic groups plays in shaping political choices. The general notion is that people who share social characteristics, such as social class, race, ethnic group, and religion, may also be expected to share political interests. A long tradition of research employs this approach (e.g., Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Berelson et al., 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; McPhee, 1963; Axelrod, 1972a, 1972b, 1978, 1982, 1986; Erikson et al., 1989; Abramson et al., 1990; Carmines and Stanley, 1990, 1992; Stanley and Niemi, 1991, 1995). But empirical work has found an inconsistent, and often declining, relationship between social group membership and political decisions (Stanley et al., 1986; Abramson et al., 1990; Carmines and Stanley, 1990, 1992; Stanley and Niemi, 1991, 1995), and scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of social groups and networks (Zuckerman 1982; Zuckerman et al., 1994). Membership in an objective social category, such as social class, is a relatively weak electoral cue unless it is reinforced by social interactions.

Thus far, the only studies that have directly investigated the impact of social networks on political choice have employed Huckfeldt and Sprague’s unique 1984 South Bend Study data set. Although much progress has been made using this data, the bulk of the analyses have focused on the nature and substance of network interaction among citizens (see Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995). The work that has been done regarding the influence of networks on decision-making has been more limited, confined chiefly to Huckfeldt and Sprague’s (1991, 1995) work exploring the nature and role of network influence on candidate choice among South Bend voters in the 1984 presidential election (also see Kenny, 1993, 1994, 1998). Although the evidence is patchy, this work strongly suggests that interpersonal discussion networks are important influences on political behavior. These networks include family and close friends, but also the effect of less intimate contacts such as coworkers (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Huckfeldt et al., 1998, 2000; Mutz and Mondak 1998).

The literature on networks provides a critical linkage between individuals and the social context in which people are embedded. It potentially provides the “glue” that connects the atomized world of individuals, captured by the calculus of voting logic, to the organized world of national-level politics. It is focused, however, on describing patterns of influence *between* individuals in the network, whereas our aim is to understand the rational incentives that such networks provide prospective voters as well as political elites. We believe that groups and networks suggest a mechanism by which individuals are incentivized to participate in politics and acquire political information, while elites will try to leverage their

organizational capacities within these networks for partisan gain (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

In large measure, we submit, people get involved in politics because they have a desire to be valued members of the groups or networks to which they belong. As cultural anthropologists are quick to point out, humans are social animals who crave the approval and respect of other people. This is a point that has been recently recognized in economic theory (Brenner and Pettit 2004), and it suggests that people will sometimes go to great lengths in doing what is expected of them by the group. They do so not to bring about the collective aim of the group, but to affect their own standing within the group. Sometimes political knowledge and participation is what the group expects, and this then turns into a critical source of political involvement. The next section elaborates the argument.

4. A model of strategic elites and socially embedded voters

By seeking a solution to the turnout puzzle in the linkage between the decisions of individual citizens and the importance of voting to political elites, some of the rational choice literature on turnout has in our view been probing in the right direction. But it has failed to provide a credible account of individual motivation, and, as a result, it has overlooked some important avenues by which elites can influence individual choices. We remedy this by first proposing a reconceptualization of the individual calculus of voting that addresses Barry's critique and incorporates insights from the sociological literature and the new economic work on esteem (Brenner and Pettit 2004). We then suggest the implications of the model for how we understand the role of political elites and macro-level institutional constraints.

4.1. The micro logic.

The first thing to note about a rational choice theory approach to voting is that PB should not influence the vote decision since $P \approx 0$. Although both P and B may matter empirically for the reasons described by Aldrich, PB cannot be treated as an exogenous variable in the individual calculus. We therefore set it to zero. It can of course still be perfectly rational for people to vote out of a sense of duty (or any other preference for voting), so we assume that, absent any other incentives, a person votes if $\delta \geq c$ where δ is the benefit derived from having fulfilled the "duty" of voting and c is the cost of voting. Again, δ is unaccounted for in rational choice models, so we can simply assume that for each individual i , i 's utility from voting is

$$\delta_i \sim U[0,1]$$

Then the probability, p_i , that i votes is

$$\begin{aligned} p_i &\equiv \Pr[\delta_i \geq c_i] \\ &= 1 - c_i \end{aligned}$$

where $c_i \in [0,1]$. Taking the low probability of an individual affecting the election outcomes seriously, and paying heed to Barry's critique, this leaves us with c_i as the only explanatory variable in the standard calculus of voting model. And while there is some evidence that higher c_i reduces turnout, it clearly does not take us very far in explaining individual heterogeneity in the propensity to vote. Indeed, those with presumably higher opportunity costs of voting -- educated people in well paying, busy jobs -- are regularly observed to be *more* likely to vote. It is even harder to see how the model could help explain the acquisition of political information since there is little reason to think that a high sense of duty to vote should make people thirstier for knowledge. The leaves the acquisition of political knowledge as simply a cost, and then we would expect all people to be rationally ignorant.

But there is an important rational incentive for people to vote and to acquire political knowledge that is completely unrelated to the act of voting itself. That is simply the desire to be able to participate effectively in the discussions and activities of the group. Once the groups comes to view politics as important, and politics emerges as a recurrent topic of discussion, knowledge about politics and willingness to act in the collectively defined interest become a marker for the relative standing of individuals in the group. Peoples' welfare -- in the very tangible sense of how much others respect and value them -- is therefore partly defined by their knowledge and participation in politics. From this perspective, participation and acquisition of political knowledge can clearly be seen as perfectly rational investments by people. Not an investment in a political outcome, as standard models assume, but in mutually rewarding relationships with other people.

Clearly, this argument is not only applicable to politics. If group discussions and activities are centered on the game of baseball, for example, most people will familiarize themselves with the rules and the key players, and they will pay enough attention to important games to be able to contribute productively to conversations about them. If the goal is esteem and standing in the group then acquisition of relevant information, as well as participation in group-sanctioned activities, are means by which to accomplish that goal. Baseball also offers a useful analogy to the irrelevance of the outcome as a motivating factor in the decision to vote. Although fans will tell you that they want to help their team win, we find it inconceivable that people's knowledge about the game, or their attendance at games, is principally motivated by a desire to win games.³

A simple formalization of the idea that group behavior shapes individual incentives is to assume that i derives utility from the approval that the social group to which he belongs bestows if he votes (and correspondingly avoids the disapproval disutility of not voting). The logic is analogous in accounting for the acquisition of political information, so here we focus only on voting. The "social" utility depends on two factors. The *first* is the proportion of the group who vote, p_I . If $p_I = 0$, so that nobody else in the group votes, it is sensible to assume that the group neither gives approval for voting nor disapproval for not voting. As more people in the group votes, voting becomes a potentially more salient activity for the group.

³ Interestingly enough there is a small home court advantage in most sports, which suggests that fans make a difference. But that does not explain why people pay to attend games any more than the desire to affect the outcome of elections explains why people go to the polls.

The extent to which this is true depends the importance, a_i , that the group attaches to voting (or political knowledge), given p_i . This is the *second* factor in the determination of the social utility. Specifically, assume the “social” utility is

$$\alpha_i \cdot p_i.$$

So now

$$\begin{aligned} p_i &= \Pr[\delta_i + \alpha_i p_i \geq c] \\ &= 1 - c + \alpha_i p_i \end{aligned}$$

Finally assume that each member of the group is identical, and that each chooses p_i simultaneously. This implies the Nash equilibrium condition

$$p_i = p_i$$

so that

$$\begin{aligned} p_i = p_i &= \frac{1 - c_i}{1 - \alpha_i} \\ &\approx (1 - c_i) \cdot (1 + \alpha_i) \end{aligned}$$

to a first order approximation.

The logic of the model is illustrated in Figure 1. The equilibrium level of turnout is the intersection of the curve for the individual propensity to vote as a function of group turnout and the 45-degree line (which, again, assumes identical individuals). The standard calculus of voting model is now the special case where $a_i=0$: The behavior of any individual is independent of the behavior of others in the group. We believe that it is this assumption of atomistic behavior that has bedeviled existing rational choice models. By ignoring that people’s welfare is affected by those around them, there is no attention in such models to the incentives of individual to behave in a particular manner because others expect them to do so.⁴

[Figure 1 about here]

As illustrated in Figure 1, individual propensity to vote rises with a_i , (and p_i) where (again) a_i is importance that the group, and hence the individual, attaches to voting and political knowledge. We have also already identified one critical variable that affects this parameter: group discussion of politics. Such discussion provides incentives to acquire information and to behave in the collectively defined interest (equivalent to moving from a_i^l to a_i^h).

⁴ It is noteworthy that rational choice models of other types of political behavior, such participation in protests or ethnic violence, have long recognized the importance of group behavior for individual behavior (Laitin 1998; Lohmann 1993). We do not know why this has eluded the rational choice literature on turnout.

But the level of discussion is itself likely to be influenced by variables that are exogenous to the individual. The heterogeneity of interests in a group is one such factor. Unlike baseball, where it is usually not hard for people to figure out which team to support (if you live in Boston, it is the Red Sox!), in politics divisions often run right through the workplace or the neighborhood. Such heterogeneity is likely to mean that politics is a topic breached only cautiously. Just as individuals crave the respect and approval of others, they shun behavior that will alienate others, and there is much evidence to the effect that people seek to avoid politics in settings where opinions are likely to diverge sharply (Mutz 2002).

Assuming some minimum level of homogeneity, the willingness to discuss politics is also likely to be a function of repeated interaction between individuals. Embeddedness in stable social and economic relationships makes it more likely that expectations about political behavior, common knowledge, will emerge. By contrast, if people are new to a neighborhood or workplace, especially in heterogeneous societies, prudence demands that you keep your opinions to yourself until you get to know your neighbors or colleagues better. Hence, when people are highly mobile, both in the sense of moving from location to location or from job to job, and in the sense of career mobility, the conditions for common knowledge about interests to arise are less propitious (i.e., a_i is inversely related to mobility).

4.2. The macro logic

Social embeddedness is not always a sufficient condition for the emergence of political knowledge and participation. Because people are not perfectly sorted into groups with identical interests (unlike baseball fans), and because politics, including distributive politics, is multi-dimensional, arriving at common knowledge about interests is rarely a spontaneous process. This fact helps explain the weak relationship between social group membership and political decisions (Stanley et al., 1986; Abramson et al., 1990; Carmines and Stanley, 1990, 1992; Stanley and Niemi, 1991, 1995). Instead, politicians, political parties, and organized groups with a vested interest in cultivating common knowledge are likely to play an important agenda-setting role. Discussion of politics, and common knowledge about interests, is likely to be partly a function of elite behavior.

Our starting point here is the conjecture by Aldrich and by Rosenstone and Hansen that political elites and political parties have an interest in mobilizing voters who might share their political agenda. As argued by Morton and others, this also applies to large interest groups who stand to benefit, or suffer, from particular public policies. But the micro-logic spelled out above suggests a quite different mechanism by which elites affect the behavior of individuals: Political parties and groups can use their local presence to set try to shape the agenda through face-to-face contacts and by initiating discussions about political issues. Of course, the intensity of such behavior will increase around elections, but the hot political issues of the day can and do find their way onto the agenda between elections. Contacting people in localities that are likely to be responsive to the political message is one method. Making use of party or group members, or sympathizers, who can take on the role of “opinion leaders” is another. An example of the latter is when shop stewards in companies – in some countries seen as the most knowledgeable and esteemed colleagues – initiate

political discussions around the lunch table. Or when community or party activists do the same in neighborhood associations or even in private parties.

Of course, the success of party contacts or the “deployment” of opinion leaders depends on the extent to which the message of such leaders resonates with the concerns of co-workers or neighbors, as well as the extent to which people feel they can to engage in political discussions without alienating others. But in settings where interests can be supposed to be well-aligned, and people know each other well, activist-induced discussions can serve as a catalyst for defining common interests and making politics a focal point for peoples’ interactions.

The implication of this argument is that political information and participation will vary with the strength of collective organizations such as parties, unions, and churches. The importance to politicians and groups of mobilizing voters is also likely to vary in a systematic way according to well-understood institutional incentives. In majoritarian two-party systems, the need to convince the median voter that they are credibly committed to a centrist platform means that parties cannot appear to be too beholden to the interests of their core constituents (Aldrich 1993; 1995, ch. 6; Schlesinger 1984; Kitschelt 1994). They *do* have an interest in getting core voters to turn out, of course, but parties cannot create strong party organizations around these voters if this is seen by the larger electorate to tie the hands of political leaders. If they did, any pronouncement of centrist platforms would be discounted by the median voter.

Multiparty PR is different because representation does not depend on capturing the median voter. Parties are therefore free to mobilize more narrowly-defined segments of the electorate – subject to the constraint that too narrow targeting will invite the formation of new parties and undermine the attractiveness of the party as a potential coalition-partner in government. The incentive to represent relatively narrow interests has to be weighted against the potential costs of fragmentation and marginalization in the legislative arena. Still, multiparty PR is far more conducive to the mobilization of narrowly defined interests than two-party majoritarianism, and no group is likely to remain un-represented if such groups can support the existence of a party. Compared to majoritarian systems, parties are likely to have stronger party organizations and less autonomous leaders (Iversen and Soskice 2005).

Another relevant distinction may be between disciplined and undisciplined parties. Where party discipline is low, typically in presidential systems where the executive does not depend on a parliamentary majority (Persson and Tabellini 1999), the target of lobbying tends to become individual legislators. In exchange for policy favors, groups can help candidates win reelection, primarily by contributing campaign funds. To the extent that they need to win a personal following, interest groups tend to remain in the background so that candidates are not perceived to be beholden to special interests. The focus is on campaign financing, not on highly visible efforts to mobilize voters.

By contrast, where party discipline is high, typically in parliamentary systems where the executive depends on such discipline to remain in power, groups cannot easily “buy” individual legislators. Instead, they need to be able to influence entire parties and the government, and that in turns requires large and highly visible capacity for collective action.

How close parties choose to ally themselves with these organizations depend, as argued above, on their incentives to cultivate an image of centrist mass appeal. Where parties are free to cater to more specialized groups, a fusion of parties and interest groups is possible up to the point where collaboration becomes a liability for government participation and for adapting flexibly to changing electoral incentives.

The simple implication we draw from this discussion is that the stronger the institutional incentives for politicians, parties, and interest groups to target particular constituencies, the greater the likelihood that politics will be on the agenda in the daily interactions of people. And once politics becomes a recurrent topic for discussion, knowledge about politics and willingness to act in the collectively defined interest will assume importance for the relative standing of individuals in the group. Peoples' welfare – in the very tangible sense of how much others respect and value them – becomes defined by their knowledge and participation in politics

5. Testing the argument

5.1. Estimating equations

In the model, individual propensity to vote and to acquire knowledge is a function of group turnout, as well as network embeddedness and the importance groups attach to participation and political knowledge. The latter, in turn, is determined by how often politics is a topic of discussion in the social networks that people belong to. One step further down the causal chain, discussion is expected to be related to the mobilizational efforts of political parties and organized groups (which in turn vary with the structure of national political institutions). So the structural estimating equations are:

$$(SE1) \quad \text{Pr}(\text{vote}) = f(\text{Group turnout, membership, and tenure; Importance of vote; Importance of political knowledge}),$$

with $f' > 0$;

$$(SE2) \quad \{\text{Importance of voting; Importance of political knowledge}\} = g(\text{Political discussion; Group turnout, membership, and tenure}),$$

with $g' > 0$;

$$(SE3) \quad \text{Political discussion} = h(\text{Party mobilization; Group turnout, membership, and tenure}),$$

with $h' > 0$.

The next step in the causal chain would be to estimate the intensity of party mobilization as a function of the structure of political institutions. Since our data are restricted to the US, we have to leave this to future work. We simply note that our argument implies a set of effects

(especially between electoral system and turnout) that are consistent with the existing comparative evidence.

The presentation of the results will proceed from equation (1) to equation (3), or from more proximate to more distant variables in the causal chain. We enter all “upstream” variables (i.e., those that are causally prior) in each regression to allow for the possibility that they have direct as well as indirect effects. So the vote regression will include all variables in (1) – (3), the importance of voting regression all the variables in (2) – (3), etc. But first a few words on the data, which were collected specifically for this project.

5.2. Data and measurement

The data we use is part of a larger survey of the American electorate organized by *The Economist* and technically managed by YouGov, a relatively new polling firm. *The Economist* commissioned a large time-series, panel study in an attempt to better understand the American opinion, attitudes, and electoral dynamics. Thus, an on-line panel of 10,000 was recruited by YouGov in the spring of 2004 and roughly 2000 respondents were given a survey each week. When joining the panel, respondents supplied a great variety of background demographic and other information, which helped ensure that each wave of approximately 2000 respondents was representative.

Our component of the larger survey was sampled from October 25th through the 27th- only weeks before the Presidential election. In addition to the regular demographic and political preference and consumption (i.e. news, etc) data, we wrote 151 questions specifically designed to test the micro-logic of our argument. We enlarged our sample from 2000 to 4000 in order to generate more variance for our measures and ultimately ended up with 3171 completed and valid responses. We weighted the sample to be representative nationally.

The dependent variable, the individual choice to *vote* or not, is captured by a question that asks whether the respondent intended to vote in the upcoming presidential election. We attempted to circumvent the well-known problem of vote over-reporting by giving people options in their answers, which would reveal their “true” intention without people actually having to declare that an intention not to vote. The question read:

“Many people don’t vote in presidential elections – either because they don’t want to, or because, on the day, they find they are unable to do so. How about you – how likely are you to vote in the Presidential election on November 2?”

The respondent could answer 1. Definitely will, 2. Probably will, 3. Might or might not, 4. Probably won’t, and 5. Definitely won’t. Counting only those who answered “definitely will” as likely voters, we get a “turnout” rate of 78 percent. This is below the typical vote response of about 85 percent in surveys such as the American National Election Studies, but it is still well above the actual turnout rate of 55% in the 2004 election.⁵ To get the reported rate closer to the actual we experimented with a tougher test for being counted as a voter

⁵ The actual turnout rate is a subject of great debate and disagreement with rates ranging anywhere between 50 and 56% participation. See McDonald (2004) for a more thorough discussion.

where the respondents also had to declare that he/she voted in 2000, and remembered who he/she voted for. This “filtered” variable reduces the “turnout” rate to 63 percent, more accordance with the actual turnout rate. But using this variable turns out not to make any difference for the substantive results, and since some independent variables refer specifically to the 2004 election the intended vote variable (coded 0-1) is in principle more appropriate.

The *group turnout rate* is captured by a question that asks “How many of your friends and co-workers do you think vote in presidential elections?” The respondent could answer 1. Almost everyone, 2. More than half, 3. About half, 4. Less than half, 5. Almost no one, 6. Don’t know. We coded the variable so that the percentage increments between the answers are assumed to be the same. Higher numbers indicate higher turnout.

Group membership captures both formal and informal group membership. Numerous questions were asked about party memberships, lobby memberships as well as about associations with social, political, and religious groups. These responses were collapsed and summarized into a macro-group membership variable which is simply an index from 0 to 1 ranging from no affiliation to the maximum affiliation available based on our questions. The mean value of this measure was .24 with a SD of .42- suggestion that we were able to capture a fair amount of variance

Length of tenure is the length a particular respondent has resided within a particular community and has been operationalized and tested as both a continuous numeric variable and a segmented “high” and “low tenure” variable. Our analysis runs this concept as a segmented variable where high tenure is dichotomized for 5 years or longer in a given community and low tenure measures 2 years or less within a particular community.

The importance of voting and *the importance of political knowledge* are measured by two questions that simply ask people “How important is it to vote?” and “How important is it to know about politics?”, where the respondent could answer 1. Extremely Important, 2. Very Important 3, Moderately Important, 4. Slightly Important, and 5. Not Important At All.

The *political discussion* variable in Estimating Equation (2) is based on three questions that ask people “Do you discuss politics in the workplace?”, “Do you discuss politics with friends or family?”, and “Do you discuss politics in your neighborhood/local community?” To each question the respondent could answer 1. No, never, 2. Rarely, 3. Occasionally, Yes, about once a week, and 5. Yes, daily. The variable is a simple additive index ranging from low to high discussion.

There are no variables in our data set that capture the mobilization efforts of political parties (Estimating Equation 3). However, the 2004 National Election Study contains a variable on *party contacts* that can be used as a proxy, and that we imported it into our data set by using averages by state. The NES variable asks, “As you know, the political parties try to talk to as many people as they can to get them to vote for their candidate. Did anyone from one of the political parties call you up or come around and talk to you about the campaign this year?,” which is a reasonable indicator for the intensity of parties electoral campaign in different states. This variable had considerable variance and so-called “battle-ground” states -- such as Ohio and Florida- had considerable greater mobilization efforts on the part of the

political parties compared to “safe-states” such as Massachusetts and Texas. We use dummy for high contact as the variable.

In addition to our theoretical variables we include a number of controls designed to capture existing arguments about turnout. These include standard demographic variables, as well as information about income and education. We also designed a question for each of the P, B, and D terms in the calculus of voting model. One asks “How close do you think the election will be?” This question serves as a proxy for the “P” term. Possible answers to this question were: So close that my vote may decide the outcome; Close, but not so close that my vote is likely to make a difference; Not close at all; Impossible to tell; and Don’t Know. The “B” (or benefits to the voter) term was captured by asking “Generally speaking, would you say that you personally care a good deal who wins the presidential election this fall, or that you don’t care very much who wins?” The possible answers were: Care a good deal; Don’t care very much; and Don’t Know. Finally, we created a question to capture the heavily discussed “D” or duty term. We plainly asked, “Do you think it a duty to vote?” and respondents answered either: Yes, Most definitely; No, Not at all; or Don’t Know.

5.3. Results

Using logistic regression, Table 1 shows the results for the vote decision. Three different specifications are used as we build up a model of the vote from the basic SES-demographic view of voting (model 1), to one that includes the standard calculus of voting measures (P, B, and D) (model 2), and ends with one that captures our social embeddedness argument (model 3). What becomes clear is that the fully specified model (model 3) predicts the vote more than 300% better than the traditional SES model (model 1). Moreover, in this final specification the P and D terms in the calculus of voting model are both indistinguishable from zero, and only education and ideology survive from in the SES model. Omitting all SES and calculus of voting variables only reduces the R-squared from .26 to .20, so the systematic component of the turnout decision is almost entirely driven by group-related variables. Since these variables are derived in a rational choice framework, the failure to explain the vote decision is not the failure of rational choice, as argued by Green and Shapiro (1996), but the failure of a particular, atomistic, version of this approach.

[Table 1 about here]

Without control for group effects, the results of the SES baseline model mirror those in previous research: Age, education, income, church attendance, union membership, and political ideology all have statistically significant effects in the predicted direction. These results are largely unchanged when we control for P, B and D, although some effects are reduced (the “old age” dummy is also no longer significant). Presumably some of the effects of the demographic variables pass through the P, B and especially D terms (older people may be more duty bound, for example).

But the more interesting finding is that most SES variables lose significance when we control for the group related variables. Some very plausible reasons for why this is true follow from our model. While union membership and church attendance are standard variables in most

SES regressions, the reason that they affect participation is likely to be the same as for membership in any other group: They help define collective interests and increase the likelihood that people will be exposed to discussion of political topics. The reason that young people are less likely to vote may be due to a similar logic since young people tend to be more mobile and less likely to have established entrenched social networks. Correspondingly there is no effect of age once we control for housing tenure. The same is true for income, where it may also be the case that low income people are less likely to stay in the same neighborhood for long periods of time.

The two variables that retain significance are education and ideology. In the first case the reason could be that education instills more civic values, but we believe that it is telling that the effect does not go through the duty term, which is close to zero. More likely, we think, the well-educated find it easier to grasp complex political issues and will be better able to work out what their collective interests are -- hence also what type of political behavior that is expected of them. This might also explain why those with intense ideological views are more likely to vote (using the traditional NES-inspired 7 point ideology scale from strong liberal to strong conservative). Certainly, there are no signs of “rational abstention” by people who are poorly represented by the mainstream parties. Again voting does not appear to be motivated by a desire to affect policies – an unproductive assumption in standard rational choice accounts.

Two of the calculus of voting variables, P and D, also drop out in the fully specified model. From a rational choice perspective this is not necessarily bad news because P *should* be close to zero (our model assumes it is equal to zero) and D is exogenous to rational choice arguments. The reason that P loses significance is probably related to Aldrich’s strategic politicians argument. As we will see in a moment, political discussion is affected by the efforts of parties to mobilize voters and such mobilization is likely to intensify in close elections. That D almost completely vanishes is perhaps more remarkable. It suggests that groups and political discussion do indeed instill civic values, as argued in a long tradition of American scholarship, but these values are *not* what drive the individual decision to vote. *That* decision is determined by the rational incentives that group membership and political discussion provide.

These incentives are captured in Model (3), which mirrors our first estimating equation (SE1). People who belong to networks where voting is common are themselves more likely to vote. This is the first effect of groups that we noted in the theoretical section, and it means that the decision to vote is dependent on what others in the group do – something the atomistic logic of the calculus of voting model neglects. As in the case of unions and churches, formal group membership also raises participation. Organized groups often try to forge a collective understanding of group interests, and people who are cognizant of these are more likely to express them. This probably also explains the positive effect of tenure on turnout, since being in the same workplace or local community for long periods of time facilitate common knowledge about interests.

The importance that people attach to voting and to having political knowledge are, not surprisingly, very strong predictors of turnout. What makes these effects theoretically interesting is that the perception of the importance of elections and politics is strongly

influenced by whether politics is a recurrent topic of discussion (see Table 2). In addition, there is a notable *direct* effect of political discussion on turnout (see the last coefficient in Model 3, Table 1). A person who is involved in groups where politics is a daily topic of discussion is 9 percent more likely to vote than a person in groups where politics is not a topic of discussion (keeping all other variables at their means).⁶ If we omit the “importance of voting and knowledge” variables from the regression, the effect increases to 19 percent. This implies that more than half the total effect of discussion on voting passes through these variables.

In Table 2 the first two models use peoples’ perception of the importance of political knowledge and voting as dependent variables. They are designed to capture the second estimating equation (*SE2*). As before, we include a complete set of SES controls, but apart from the effect of church attendance, there are no systematic and strong effects to report. The calculus of voting variables (P, B and D) are all highly significant, but it is reasonable to think that some, if not all, of the observed effects flow in the opposite direction. Since the effects that our model predicts are stronger without these variables, including them is essentially a conservative estimation strategy.

As we already noted above, political discussion appears to incentivize people to view politics as a matter of considerable importance. To address the objection that those who think politics is important may also be the ones who initiate discussion -- thus producing an endogeneity problem -- we included a question that explicitly ask respondents whether they initiated political discussion. This turns out not to have affect the key result: By far the most important determinant of peoples’ perception of the importance of political knowledge, and of voting, is whether politics is a recurrent topic of discussion.⁷

[Table 2 about here]

The nature of group discussion for politics, which we see as critical, has not received much attention in the literature (Walsh, 2003). But recent ethnographic work on one of America’s most powerful and best-organized voting coalitions -- the so-called “Christian coalition” -- illustrates its importance. Gladwell (2005) has documented the rise of the “cellular church” a very large church which has been created, “...out of a network of lots of little church cells...groups of tightly knit groups...who meet in one another’s homes during the week.” These small groups do not have a hierarchical structure. Rather, “members sat in a circle. The focus was on discussion and interaction -- not one teaching and the others listening.” Regular meetings and small groups -- which create a larger network and ultimately a larger church -- have enabled mega-churches like Saddleback or Lakewood to grow and still remain cohesive with tens of thousands of members.

These large churches, and the evangelical movement more generally, do not restrict themselves to prayer and religious contemplation. In recent years, churches have become

⁶ These effects were found using CLARIFY simulations (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King. 2003).

⁷CLARIFY simulations illustrate the strength of the political knowledge-recurrent discussion connection. From the baseline, when we set the parameter to the lowest possible level of discussion, 34% of the sample believes that it is important “to know about politics.” When we set the parameter to the maximum value, 67% of the sample believes the having political knowledge is important- a 97% increase.

active political actors and certainly do not shy away from political topics (Wallis, 2005). It has been widely documented that the evangelical movement has become a powerful political force within American politics (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005; Wolfe, 2003) over the past two decades - which correlates nicely to the founding and rise of these mega-churches and their discussion networks.

While largely anecdotal, this story illustrates the general idea in our argument. Our model implies that regular and repeated interaction among small groups promotes greater civic engagement and political participation in the form of voting. Evangelicals talk regularly and few groups are more organized and participatory. The cumulative political effect may be very large, although we are not able to quantify it with our data.

We *can* however show that deliberate strategies by political parties to mobilize voters do appear to have an effect by inducing political discussion (see model 3). Thus, in states with high frequency of party contacts, the level of political discussion is significantly higher than elsewhere. The difference is equivalent to an 18% percent increase in discussion between states at either end of the continuum. Note also that when the party contact variable is included, the effect of P nearly vanishes. This is precisely what we should expect if close elections also lead to more party contacts. Again, Aldrich (1993) appears to be right when he speculates that the reason P matters is not that people think they are more likely to make or break a tie, but that it leads political elites to invest more in mobilization of voter turnout. What we add to this idea is a clear mechanism for how elite mobilization matters, namely that mobilization increases the likelihood that politics becomes a topic of discussion.

Tenure does not register a significant effect on the frequency of discussion. Yet, we know from the vote regression in Table 1 that it *does* raise the probability of voting. We surmise that the effect of tenure on voting is mainly through facilitation of common knowledge. The longer people have known each other, the more likely they understand their common interests and what is expected of them in terms of articulating and acting on this interest. While the precise mechanism needs to be pinned down, we are impressed by not only the survey evidence, but also by sub-county level data on housing tenure and turnout that we have collected for Massachusetts (see Figure 2). The correlation between residence and voting is .46, and when we weight the sub-counties by population (as pictured in the figure) the correlation grows to .74. Tenure is a strong correlate of turnout.

[Figure 2 about here]

6. Conclusion

Because it is difficult to understand voting in standard rational choice models as investments in desirable outcomes, participation is often seen as quasi-irrational. The same is true of political knowledge acquisition. Voting becomes an act that is poorly linked to the real interests of groups, and that is easily manipulated by elites. By contrast, we have argued in this paper that voting and political knowledge *are* in fact safely anchored in group interests and *can* indeed be understood as an investment in desirable outcomes. As implied by

network theory, the objective for individuals is not to influence the result of an election, but to maintain and improve their standing in the networks and communities to which they belong. Being knowledgeable about group interests, and being prepared to act in the interest of the group, are key ingredients in establishing such standing.

Whether politics emerges as the focal point for social interaction is partly a function of people interacting repeatedly in settings where it is natural to think that their preferences are well aligned – in the workplace, the neighborhood, and the broader communities to which people belong. It is also a function of political elites trying to mobilize support in order to win elections. Because the incentives of elites, especially political parties, vary systematically with the political-institutional context, so does voter turnout and the distribution of political knowledge. The closeness of elections is part of this context, but so are political institutions like electoral systems.

Using new opinion survey data we find considerable evidence for these propositions at the individual level. Discussion of politics leads individuals to believe that it is important to know about politics and to vote, and this in turn predicts whether people actually vote. Consistent with the notion that common knowledge is as a precondition for participation, we also find that people who live in the same neighborhood or community for a long time are more prone to think voting and politics are important, and to discuss politics. In addition, the level of political discussion is higher in close states where parties campaign intensely. In combination, these results paint a very clear and coherent picture of the most basic political activity in a democracy. There is nothing irrational about voting as, paradoxically, simple rational choice models of turnout imply. When people vote and read about politics it is because this is sometimes a way get respect from other people in their social networks. Politicians understand this and try to influence what groups discuss and find important.

The solution we have proposed to the rational abstention and rational ignorance puzzles helps explain why democratic politics tends to be fairly stable and structured around economic interests. It may also help explain why the distribution of participation and political knowledge varies across countries, although much empirical work obviously remains to verify our hypotheses. For example, our explanation implies that political knowledge and voting are determined by the same set of factors. Since we know that voter non-turnout is concentrated among the poor, this implies that the poor in high-vote countries are better informed about politics and their interests. If so, it is important to the politics of redistribution. Another issue that deserves attention is just how political parties and groups use social networks to advance their causes. Class interests are certainly a factor as is the question of how mobility and institutions interact, which will require a multi-level analysis that combines the individual and national levels.

All told, this is paper just the beginning of a much more expansive and involved research project. These preliminary results show, however, that the sociological-infused embeddedness model- which reframes voting as rational conditioned on group affiliation- certainly gives us more traction in explaining varying degrees of voter turnout than that of the rational choice and SES anomic-individual approach. Such a lens may help explain varying degrees of participation in both the United States and in comparative context.

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1. The probability of voting as a function of group voting

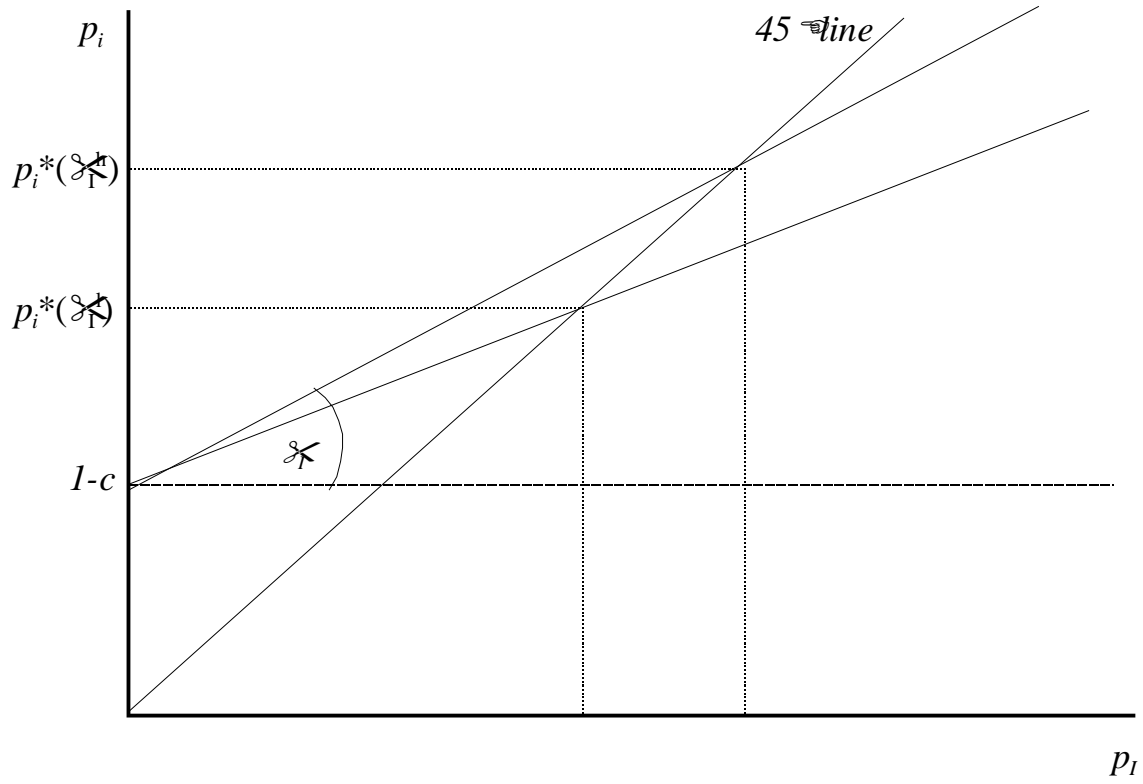
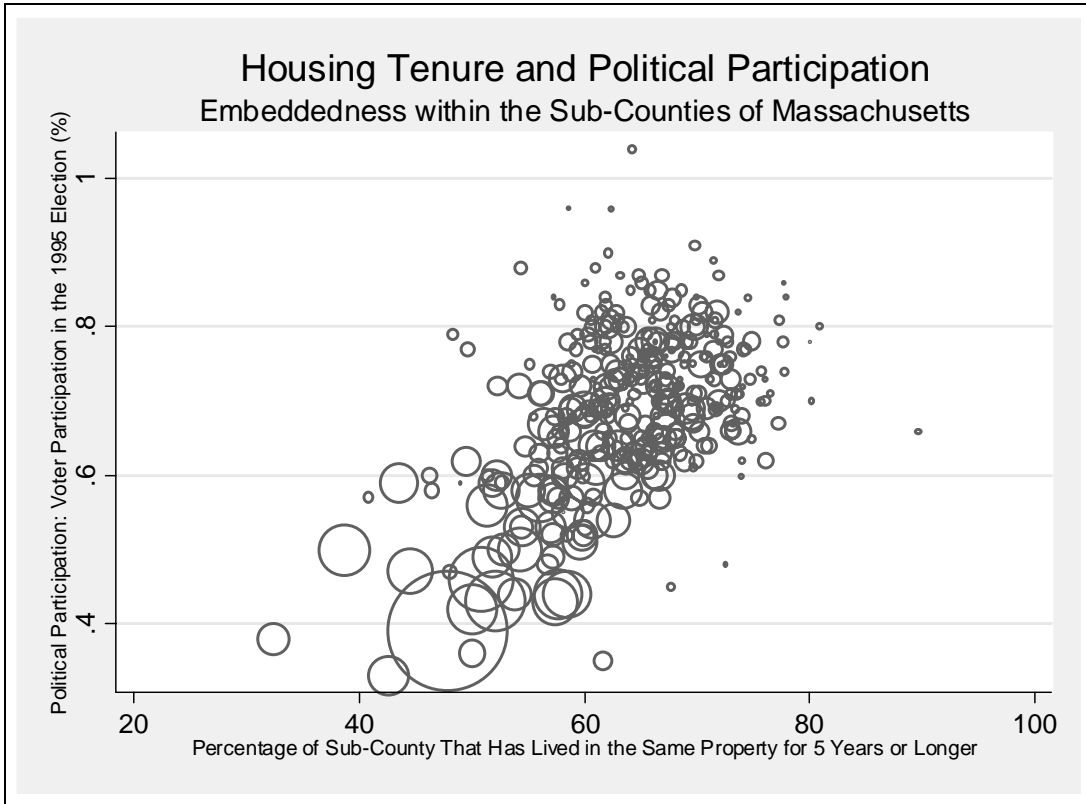


Figure 2. Housing Tenure and Political Participation



Source: Calculated from data provided by Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the Federal Election Commission.

Table 1. Logit Regressions on the 2004 Vote

| | Basic Demographic Model | Calculus of Voting Model | Embeddedness Model: Discussion and Groups |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Education: High | .53* (.11) | .47* (.10) | .44* (.12) |
| Job: Full/Part-Time | .00 (.09) | .05 (.10) | -.04 (.11) |
| Church Attendance: High | .22** (.11) | .18** (.08) | .14 (.17) |
| Age: 18 –26 | -1.06* (.14) | -1.14* (.15) | .19 (.20) |
| Age: 65 and Over | .53** (.22) | .31 (.23) | .17 (.26) |
| Income: High | .24* (.09) | .20 (.11) | .09 (.11) |
| Union Membership | .37** (.15) | .20** (.17) | .14 (.18) |
| Ideology: Moderate | -.36* (.03) | -.24* (.04) | -.21* (.04) |
| 8. Closeness of election | .87* (.21) | .76* (.22) | .54* (.25) |
| P | -- | .44* (.09) | .14 (.11) |
| B | -- | 1.75* (.18) | 1.12* (.19) |
| D | -- | .91* (.13) | .17 (.15) |
| 1. Group turnout | -- | -- | .18* (.04) |
| 2. Group membership | -- | -- | .36* (.12) |
| 3. Length of tenure (high) | -- | -- | .30* (.12) |
| 4. Importance of voting | -- | -- | 1.18* (.11) |
| 5. Importance of knowledge | -- | -- | .29* (.08) |
| 6. Political discussion (high) | -- | -- | .29* (.12) |
| Adjusted R2 | .08 | .16 | .26 |
| N | 2511 | 2511 | 2511 |

Standard errors are in parentheses. *p = .05 Race and gender controls included in all regressions. *ImpK or Importance of Knowledge is operationalized by asking three related questions in the data set. The importance of having knowledge of current events generally, knowledge of politics, and knowledge about the present political campaign and upcoming elections were probed. The answers to “about the present political campaign and upcoming elections” are used in ImpK, though the other two variants provide similar results.

Table 2. Logit Regressions Showing the Causal Chain of Political Knowledge and Discussion

| | Importance of Political Knowledge | Importance of Voting | Political Discussion |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Education: High | -.02 (.03) | -.06 (.12) | .34* (.09) |
| Job: Full/Part-Time | .01 (.11) | .15 (.14) | -.06 (.10) |
| Church Attendance: High | .39* (.18) | .12* (.05) | .17* (.06) |
| Age: 18 –26 | -.02 (.17) | .05** (.21) | -.63* (.16) |
| Age: 65 and Over | .43** (.24) | -.29 (.33) | .20 (.22) |
| Income: High | -.06 (.09) | -.06 (.13) | .24* (.09) |
| Union Membership | .08 (.15) | .04 (.19) | .00 (.14) |
| Ideology: Moderate | -.05 (.04) | -.13* (.04) | -.06** (.03) |
| Closeness of election | .17* (.07) | .18* (.02) | .75* (.28) |
| P | .52* (.09) | 1.02* (.14) | .17* (.09) |
| B | 2.04* (.28) | 1.66* (.19) | .87* (.18) |
| D | .62* (.15) | 1.70* (.15) | .34* (.11) |
| Length of tenure (high) | .11 (.10) | .02 (.13) | .07 (.09) |
| Discussion: High | .72* (.05) | .42* (.07) | -- |
| Initiate Discussion | .12* (.05) | .03 (.06) | -- |
| Groups: Sum. Measure | .10 (.11) | .33* (.15) | .20* (.04) |
| Group turnout | .14* (.04) | .27* (.04) | .15 (.10) |
| Party Contact: High | -- | -- | .28 * (.03) |
| Adjusted R2 | .17 | .26 | .06 |
| N | 2511 | 2511 | 2511 |

Standard errors are in parentheses. *p = .05 Race and gender controls included in all regressions. *ImpK or Importance of Knowledge is operationalized by asking three related questions in the data set. The importance of having knowledge of current events generally, knowledge of politics, and knowledge about the present political campaign and upcoming elections were probed. The answers to “about the present political campaign and upcoming elections” are used in ImpK, though the other two variants provide similar results.