

# Why We Vote: How Positive Descriptive Norms and Holding a Minority Political Viewpoint Increase Citizens' Intention and Responsibility to Vote

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## ABSTRACT

Analyses of voter turnout rates in the United States have established that nearly half of eligible American voters consistently choose not to participate in elections. This trend of low voter turnout is predicted to continue and poses an impending threat to our democracy. The present study investigated the effect of descriptive norms and holding a minority or majority viewpoint on citizens intention to vote and perceived responsibility to vote. Two hundred eighty-three citizens were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in a survey created through Qualtrics. Participants were shown a flyer encouraging their participation in an upcoming gubernatorial election and were randomly assigned to a version that described expected turnout (large, average and small) and percentage of registered Democrats (30%, 70%, or information omitted). Positive descriptive norms, which indicated that there was a large voter turnout, led to a significantly greater intention to vote ( $p < .001$ ) and perceived responsibility to vote ( $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, a minority viewpoint led to an increased sense of responsibility to vote ( $p < .001$ ) but did not affect intention to vote. This experiment suggests that positive descriptive norms and holding a minority viewpoint can be powerful tools in motivating citizens to vote.

**Keywords:** Descriptive norms; Democracy; Elections; Political insight; Vote

## INTRODUCTION

The voter turnout rate in the United States fluctuates, but almost one-half of American citizens consistently choose not to vote [1]. Low voter turnout rates lead to unequal representation and undermine the fundamental pillars of our democracy [2]. Some studies have argued that citizens who choose not to vote do not care about the outcome of the election [3]. However, many studies have suggested that factors unrelated to the political race influence the likelihood of citizens to vote. As low voter turnout rates continue to be a problem within our country, this study explored the potential effect of descriptive social norms and holding a minority or majority viewpoint on citizen's intention to vote and perceived responsibility to vote.

According to the Focus Theory of Normative Conduct (FTNC), social norms play a large role in people's behavior [4]. As opposed to injunctive social norms, which describe what individuals perceive others should be doing, descriptive social norms describe what individuals actually do. Descriptive social

norms have been found to be more influential on people's behavior than injunctive social norms [5]. While most people are cognizant of what the right thing to do is, they are unlikely to have an accurate sense of what others are actually doing [6]. Descriptive social norms have been shown to influence people to do a variety of things such as eat healthy snacks, donate their organs, and decrease their energy use [7-9]. Descriptive social norms impact citizen's day-to-day decisions but are believed to hold greater weight when making more important choices like whether one should vote and if so, for who [10].

Descriptive social norms seem to play a large role in whether citizens decide to vote. One study showed that citizen's decision to vote conformed to their beliefs about whether most people would vote [11]. Gerber and Rogers created statements that manipulated predictions of high or low voter turnout at the California general election and New Jersey primary election. Participants were either told that the turnout rate would be extremely high (a positive descriptive norm) or extremely low (a negative descriptive norm) at their respective upcoming elections

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and then were subsequently asked whether they planned on voting. The study showed that more than three-quarters (76.3%) of participants who heard the predicted turnout would be high, claimed they would be 100% likely to vote, whereas only 68.9% of participants who heard the predicted turnout would be low reported they would be 100% likely to vote. In a similar study, the researchers created three scripts that were read aloud to participants; participants were informed that there were either very high, low, or average predicted turnout rates at the Michigan, Missouri and Tennessee primary elections [12]. The results of this study revealed that intended turnout rates increased most for positive descriptive norms and increased least for neutral descriptive norms, with negative descriptive norms in between.

However, in situations in which voters are told not only what percentage of people are expected to turnout but also the political views of those people, research has suggested that positive descriptive norms have less of an effect on individuals' intention to vote than negative descriptive norms. When people know they hold a minority viewpoint, they may perceive their vote to be more pivotal in determining the election's outcome [13]. In one study, participants were told either that many or few of the registered voters shared their political views [13]. The results showed that participants were significantly more likely to say that they intended on voting and felt greater responsibility to vote if they were told that few registered voters shared their political beliefs. In a similar study, after reporting how responsible they initially felt to vote in an election, participants were either told that few people with their political beliefs had registered to vote or that many people with their political beliefs had registered to vote [14]. There was a 2.85% increase in reported feelings of responsibility to vote among participants who were told that few registered voters with their political views, as opposed to only a 0.19% increase among participants who were told there were already a lot of registered voters with their political views.

While previous studies have demonstrated that descriptive norms and minority viewpoints elevate intention and feelings of responsibility to vote in isolation, the combined effect of these factors has yet to be assessed. In addition, the current study sought to build on the few studies that have compared positive and negative descriptive norms to a neutral condition. This study will compare the effects of descriptive social norms on the intended voter turnout and perceived responsibility to vote among citizens when they are informed of the political beliefs of registered voters and when they are not. Based on previous literature, the following hypotheses will be tested.

Positive descriptive norms will lead to

- Greater intention to vote
- Greater responsibility to vote

A minority viewpoint will lead to

- Greater intention to vote
- Greater responsibility to vote

## METHODOLOGY

### Design and procedure

The design of the study was a 3 (Descriptive Norm: Positive, negative, neutral) × 3 (Percent of Registered Democrats: 30%, 70%, information not provided) × 2 (Political Stance of Participant: Democrat, Republican) between subjects full factorial design. Participants were presented with a consent form and then read a flyer encouraging them to imagine whether they would vote in an upcoming gubernatorial election in their state of residence. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of nine versions of the flyer and then to complete a survey evaluating their intention to vote in the election and their perceived responsibility to vote at this election.

### Participants

Participants were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online crowdsourcing website, where people complete tasks for small amounts of money. In comparison to other sources for online samples, participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk have been more diverse and demonstrate greater conscientiousness while answering questions [15]. Unlike other sources, which provide participants who are predominantly European-American, affluent, or in college, the participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk are more generalizable to the greater population [16].

Participants in the present study were 283 adult U.S. citizens. There was a relatively even split between women (55%) and men (44%) in the sample, in addition to 1% of participants who identified as another gender. There was also representation among the participants from both major political parties: Democrat (56%) and Republican (44%). Race composition was 46% White, 20% Asian, 17% Black, 7% Latinx, 6% Multiracial and 4% Pacific Islander. The average age of participants was 42 years old and ranged from being 18 to 97 years old.

### Experimental stimuli

Nine versions of a flyer encouraging participation in an upcoming gubernatorial election in the participant's state were created for this study; an example is shown in the appendix.

Participants were either presented with three positive, negative, or neutral descriptive norms about turnout at a previous gubernatorial election. The positive descriptive norms said that: A large percentage of eligible voters voted at the previous election, there is a high voter turnout predicted to continue at the upcoming election and that they are encouraged to join their fellow citizens and vote. Participants who were presented with negative descriptive norms were told that: A small percentage of eligible voters voted at the previous election, there is a low voter turnout predicted to continue at the upcoming election and that they are encouraged to resist the trend and vote. Lastly, participants who were presented with the neutral descriptive norm were told that a typical number of eligible voters voted at the previous election, there is an average voter

turnout predicted to continue at the upcoming election and that they are encouraged to vote.

The majority/minority viewpoint of participants was manipulated by varying the percentage of registered Democrats mentioned in the flyer. One-third of participants were told that barely 30% of the registered voters are Democrats, which would make Democrat participants the minority. Another one-third of the participants were told that nearly 70% of the registered voters are Democrats. The final one-third of participants did not receive any information about the views of the registered voters.

### Dependent measures

Intention to vote was measured by a single item obtained from an earlier study. This item used a 7-point bipolar scale that asks participants to rank how likely they would be to vote at the upcoming gubernatorial election from a value of 1 (very unlikely) to a value of 7 (very likely).

The Perceived Responsibility to Vote Scale consists of four items from an earlier study. One item of the scale stated, “By voting at this election, I will demonstrate socially responsible characteristics.” Ratings in this sample showed strong internal reliability with a Cronbach’s alpha of .95.

After answering these questions, participants were asked to indicate whether they identify more as a Democrat or Republican. Participants’ political affiliations were used to assess whether they held the minority or majority viewpoint when answering the survey. Participants also completed a manipulation check asking them to state whether there was a high/low/average turnout at the previous gubernatorial election and what percentage of registered voters were Democrats. These questions ensured that participants were aware of this information while completing the survey. If participants failed to answer the manipulation checks correctly, they were not included in the data analyzed.

### Data analysis

Two three-way Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to explore the effect of descriptive norms, percentage of registered Democrats and political stance of participants on intention to vote and perceived responsibility to vote. When main effects were significant, Tukey Kramer post-hoc tests explored differences between the different pairs of conditions.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive norms

Descriptive norms had a significant main effect on citizen’s intention to vote,  $F(2, 267)=1329.13, p<.001, \eta^2=.91$ . As hypothesized, positive descriptive norms led to the highest intent to vote, as shown in Figure 1.

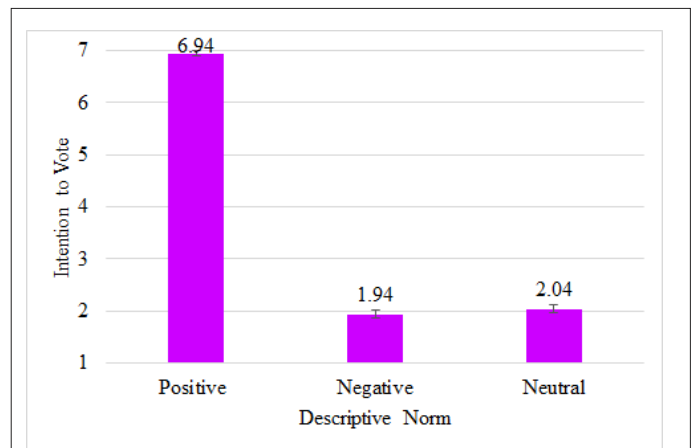


Figure 1: The effect of descriptive norms on intention to vote.

Interestingly, the effect size was extremely high; indicating that over 90% of the variance in participants’ intention to vote was accounted for by descriptive norms. Descriptive norms also had a significant main effect on citizen’s perceived responsibility to vote,  $F(2, 267)=19.57, p<.001, \eta^2=.13$ . Positive descriptive norms were more effective in causing participants to feel responsible to vote than negative or neutral descriptive norms, as hypothesized and shown in Figure 2.

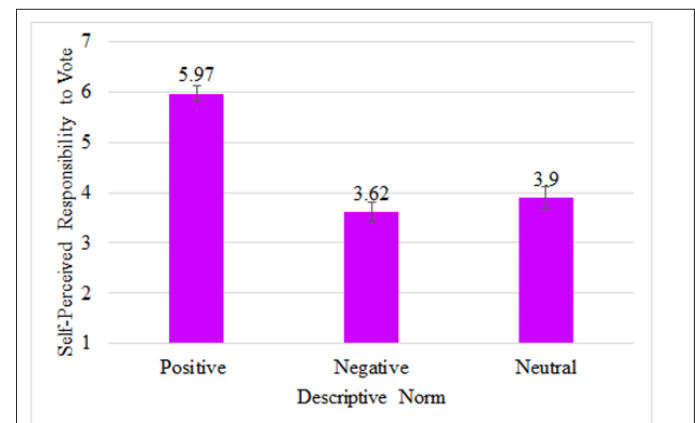
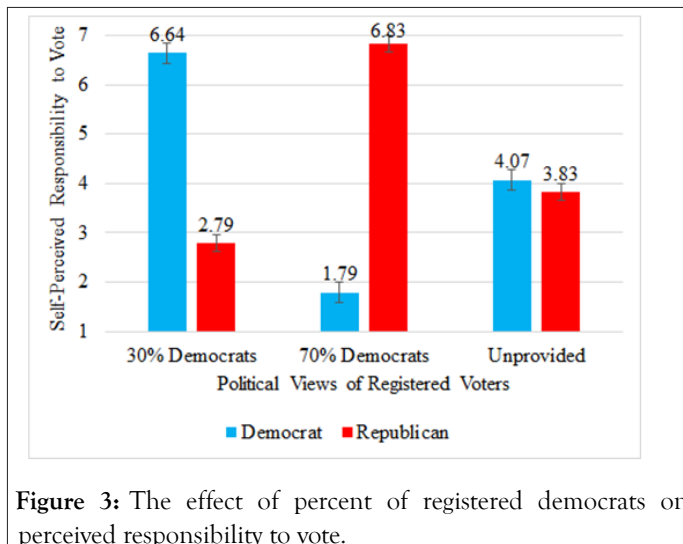


Figure 2: The effect of descriptive norms on perceived responsibility to vote.

### Majority or minority political viewpoint of participants

The expected interaction was found between the percent of registered Democrats and the political alignment of participants on citizen’s perceived responsibility to vote  $F(2, 267)=149.92, p<.001, \eta^2=.53$ . This result, depicted in Figure 3, supported the hypothesis that holding a minority political viewpoint leads to higher ratings of perceived responsibility to vote. When there were few registered Democrats, the Democrat participants who were the minority felt a greater responsibility to vote than their Republican counterparts. Likewise, when the majority of registered voters were Democrats, the Democrat participants reported feeling less of a responsibility than the Republican participants. Participants who were not provided with information about the percent of registered Democrats reported similar levels of responsibility to vote.



**Figure 3:** The effect of percent of registered democrats on perceived responsibility to vote.

On the other hand, the percent of registered Democrats did not affect citizen's intention to vote,  $F(2, 267)=.851, p=.428, \eta^2=.01$ . Participants were not more likely to say they intended to vote when they held minority views than majority views.

## DISCUSSION

### Descriptive norms

In line with the hypotheses, positive descriptive norms led to the highest ratings of intention to vote and perceived responsibility to vote. Previous studies have shown that people strive for social conformity and are more likely to partake in an activity in which many other people will also participate [11]. This finding provides further support for the Focus Theory of Normative Conduct, which states that social norms play a large role in individuals' behavior individuals are driven to fit into the social norm and behave in a way that is consistent with others [4].

While the direction of the findings was predicted, the large effect sizes were unexpected. The effect size for intention to vote was over 90%, indicating that nearly 91% of the variance in citizen's intention to vote can be accounted for by descriptive norms. Hence, people's decision of whether or not to vote was almost entirely based on whether they believe other people will vote as well. Previous studies have found that positive descriptive norms are more influential than negative or neutral descriptive norms in encouraging a behavior, but no research up until this point has found this magnitude of descriptive norms' overall influence [12]. Prior studies manipulated the descriptive norm percentages, but called citizens in an area where a gubernatorial election was approaching, rather than administering a survey about a hypothetical gubernatorial election. As a result, participants of previous studies may have been influenced by other factors such as the candidates and their agendas, which they could have easily explored. In the present study, the election was less realistic, as no information about the candidate or their beliefs was obtainable. As a result, the variable of descriptive norms was isolated, which may have contributed to the large effect size.

### Majority or minority political viewpoint of participants

Participants who held a minority political viewpoint in the election reported feeling more responsible to vote. This finding supports the second hypothesis. People likely are driven to participate in an activity where they believe their input will make a difference [13]. When individuals were informed that their political party was not represented well in the election, they may have felt a responsibility to vote.

Interestingly, participants with minority viewpoints did not indicate a higher intention to vote. The lack of increased intentionality to vote suggests that feelings of responsibility do not necessarily translate into intention to vote much less actually voting. Participants may have indicated that they feel more responsible to vote, as they understood that their vote was important. Feelings of responsibility do not require any action and may therefore be more easily swayed than intentions to act.

### Strengths, further study and limitations

Strength of the current study is that the experimental design allowed for a high level of control and the exclusion of many potential confounds. When natural experiments are conducted in advance of actual elections, participants' varying levels of exposure to the candidates may confound the results. However, the cost of this level of control was a sacrifice of realism. Taken together, the results of the present study and past studies involving actual elections indicate that descriptive norms have a large, consistent effect on intent to vote.

In the present study, participants were not asked to denote the extremity of their political beliefs; they were only asked to indicate whether they identified more with the Democratic or Republican party. Further investigation into how the extremity of one's political views affects their likelihood of voting may provide deeper insight into the psychology behind citizen's votes. Especially given that many people orient themselves in a specific region of the political spectrum, this aspect of citizen's political identity is an interesting field for further exploration. When manipulating the percentage of registered voters, the study utilized the percentages employed in previous experiments (30% indicating the minority and 70% indicating the majority). However, it would be interesting to test a wider array of percentages in the future. For instance, if the difference between the minority and majority percentages was very low, such as a 45% minority and 55% majority. Conversely, is it possible for the gap between the minority and majority to be so large that the minority feel it is pointless to vote?

Political candidates do not typically convince citizens to vote by explicitly telling them that they hold a minority viewpoint. Candidates may feel that telling individuals they are a minority could be offensive, rather than encouraging [17]. Oftentimes, members of marginalized groups are not cognizant that they often hold a minority viewpoint in an election [18-20]. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that holding a minority viewpoint increases citizen's perceived responsibility to vote. This feeling of responsibility could be utilized as a catalyst for encouraging citizens to vote [21-23].

## CONCLUSION

In the future, advertisements that encourage voting can utilize positive descriptive norms, which will appeal to people's tendency to follow the norm and participate in the election. Many of our greatest societal issues—prejudice, inequality, sexism—are exacerbated by low voter turnout. Currently, all American citizens are not equally represented in the government; a disproportionate majority of individuals in power are still white men. Thus, encouraging all Americans to vote is imperative to establishing a more representative government and ensuring that all citizen's voices are heard—descriptive norms and minority viewpoints may be the most promising ways to accomplish this goal.

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