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# Elections and norms of behaviour: a survey\*

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Abstract: This paper surveys the recent literature on the relation between social norms and electoral outcomes. It argues that the relation goes both ways: social norms can affect electoral outcomes and vice versa.

## 1. Introduction

Beside intrinsic motivations that are the baseline axiom of the classic public choice models of voting, turnout, and collective action (*e.g.* Black, 1948a, b, Downs, 1957, or Buchanan and Tullock, 1962), people also react to what others do and consider appropriate. We shake our right hands not because we intrinsically value it but because others do and because offering one's left hand would be considered bizarre by others. We also avoid certain verbal expressions and behaviours because they would be considered inappropriate. If not respecting a social norm is objected, social pressure may prompt some agents to choose an action that they would not spontaneously choose or prevent them from choosing an action that they intrinsically prefer. This is the essence of social norms, which can be defined as customary rules of behaviour that coordinate our interactions with others (Young, 2008). While legal norms are sustained by formal institutions, social norms are sustained by expectations: individuals conform to a norm if they believe that a sufficiently large subset of the population conforms to the same norm and expects them to conform to it too (Bicchieri et al., 2018).

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The first key feature of norms is therefore that they constrain behaviour, however imperfectly. As social norms permeate most dimensions of social life, they unsurprisingly also affect politics and elections. Acting as a “grammar of social interactions” (Bicchieri et al., 2018), social norms shape the way individuals come to make inferences about political issues and eventually vote. Moreover, social norms can affect the desirability of turning out itself, possibly affecting the outcome of elections.

The second feature of social norms is that they are stable or inert: Individuals have an incentive to conform to a norm, because unilateral deviations are costly, and therefore contribute to perpetuating the norm. As long as individuals expect the share of the relevant population abiding by a norm to be large enough, they will stick to the norm. Social norms will therefore generally be sluggish. Yet sudden changes are also possible and elections may prompt such sudden changes. Because social norms may stigmatize certain opinions or behaviours, they may repress the expression of opinions or behaviours that a large share of the population would nonetheless consider acceptable or even desirable. By contrast, elections may allow people to express stigmatized attitudes and reveal the true support for the norm in society prompting its members to revise their beliefs and behaviours.

In a nutshell, social norms affect elections’ outcomes, and vice-versa. The next section focuses on the first link by discussing how social norms may affect electoral outcomes. The second section reverses the causal chain and surveys a more recent literature documenting how electoral outcomes affected social norms, either in the US where the phenomenon was first observed, or abroad.

## **How social norms affect elections**

At the most basic level, social norms can pertain to the act of turning out. However, they may also affect electoral outcomes.

### *Turnout*

The most basic effect of social norms on elections is through the decision to turnout. The paradox of voting posits that the cost of voting likely exceeds the probability of being decisive in an election and that rational self-interested voters would therefore not turn out (Downs, 1957). Social norms offer a solution to this theoretical puzzle: If voting is viewed as a duty and not voting is frowned upon, then voters will feel compelled to vote. Social pressure compensates the lack of legal enforcement of voting in most democracies. If a citizen believes that most fellow citizens will turnout and expect her to turnout, she will have an incentive to turnout. Turnout can accordingly increase substantially even if the number of individuals motivated by their voting duty is relatively

small (Amaro de Matos and Barros, 2004), particularly among groups that are particularly sensitive to social norms (Goerres, 2007, Panagopoulos and Abrajano, 2014). The effect may, however, be different for local and national elections (Hillman et al., 2015).

The effect of social pressure on turnout is empirically well documented. Gerber et al. (2008) used mailings prior to a primary election in Michigan to test the role of social pressure on turnout. They randomly sent four series of letters with increasing social pressure on voters. The first simply reminded recipients that voting was a civic duty. The second added that their turn out would be studied by means of public records. The third mail added the recent voting record of each registered voter in the household. The fourth further increased social pressure by listing not only the voting records of the members of the household but also those of their neighbours. The four mails therefore went from recalling a civic duty to telling recipients that their neighbours could know whether they would vote in the election or not. Gerber et al. (2008) found that voters who had received one of the four mails were more likely to turn out than voters belonging to the control group who had received no mail at all. Moreover, the effect of the mails on turnout increased monotonically with the degree of social pressure. Accordingly, if voters see voting as a moral duty, they are more likely to perform that duty the more social pressure they face.

DellaVigna et al. (2016) provide further evidence that social norms support turnout by demonstrating that concerns for social image, derived from the expectations that society at large values one's decision to turnout, is a relevant driver of behaviour. They devised a door-to-door survey of Chicagoan households shortly after the US 2010 congressional elections among households whose registered members had either all turned out or all not turned out in the election. The day before the survey, one randomly selected group received a treatment consisting in a flyer on their doorknob announcing that a surveyor would approach the home the next day within a specified hour. Another group received the same flyer at the same time with the extra mention that the survey was about their "voter participation in the 2010 congressional election". DellaVigna et al. (2016) then measured the share of households who opened their doors and completed the survey across the two groups. Whereas households who had turned out in the election were equally likely to open their doors and complete the survey regardless of the message on their doorknob, those who had not turned out were less likely to open their doors when they had received the message referring to their participation in the election. Accordingly, households whose members had not voted were willing to make an effort to avoid taking the risk of revealing that they had not turned out, which indicates shame from admitting that one did not vote, in other words the presence of a social norm stigmatizing not turning out. DellaVigna et al. (2016) estimate that the norm contributed to approximately 2 percentage points to turnout.

The effect of social pressure on turnout may moreover be long-lasting, as evidenced from six field experiments leveraged by Davenport et al. (2010). This might either be due to social pressure being internalized, thus leading to social learning (Bardura, 1977), or to the fact that undertaking the behaviour prescribed by social pressures leads to the formation of habits (Plutzer, 2002; Gerber, 2003).

If field experiments can have a lasting influence on turnout, more meaningful experiences, like being exposed to other norms while living abroad, are bound to also affect turnout. This is what Chauvet and Mercier (2014) find. They observe that turnout is higher in Malian municipalities that accommodate more returnees from migration in Western countries, in line with the assumption that migrant who have been exposed to democratic institutions bring back new norms to their country of origin. Chauvet and Mercier (2014), moreover, report evidence that the impact of returnees on turnout exceeds the effect of their own higher propensity to turnout, suggesting a diffusion of their political norms in the population. The finding by Bjørnskov and Rode (2021) that countries that became independent after the 1950s and had experienced some form of democratic functioning prior to independence were more likely to remain democratic, also suggests that experiencing democracy may nurture democratic norms.

### *Election results*

Social norms affect electoral outcomes in two ways, one indirect the other direct. The first is through turnout, because by definition only voters can affect electoral outcomes. If norms pertaining to turnout are enforced at the group-level, as suggested by Grossman and Helpman (2001), if different norms have currency in different groups, or if all voters are not equally sensitive to the common norm, then the norm will affect the composition of voters, hence possibly the outcome of the vote if voters and non-voters support different policies or candidates (Konzelmann et al. 2012). In line with that presumption, the evidence shows that exogenous (Hansford and Gomez, 2010) or policy-driven (Bechtel et al., 2016) increases in turnout do affect outcomes, typically by tilting them to the left because voters who tend to vote less systematically, like poorer, less educated, and younger citizens, have typically been associated with support for left-wing policies.

The second and direct way through which social norms can affect outcomes is by affecting preferences for specific political options because social norms can coalesce people around specific policy preferences. Recent work by Groenendyk et al. (2022) using survey data shows that US citizens tend to possess good knowledge of the ideological norms of liberals and conservatives and are thus in a position to consciously decide whether to conform or refute those norms. More to

the point, when Groenendyk et al. (2022) prime group identity by asking respondents to gauge the preferences on a series of issues of their ideological group before asking them their own preferences, they observed a greater conformity of the preferences of individuals with their own group. Accordingly, the norms of the group to which one identifies constrain the preferences that one expresses. Groenendyk et al. (2022) relate their finding to differences in rates of vaccination and mask wearing between US liberals and conservatives not as a mere reflection of personal health calculus but also as a social identity pressure in a phase of affective polarization.

Of all social norms, those most directly relevant to the formation of political preferences may be norms of distribution (Elster 1989), which regulate preferences for the specific type of equality that policies should pursue. Theoretical analyses of the interplay between social norms and economic incentives show how social norms may craft welfare regimes that ultimately correct or magnify market inequality (Lindbeck et al., 1999; Alesina and Angeletos, 2005). Mendelberg et al. (2017) provide an example of how social norms can be acquired and shape the *formation* of political preferences, especially during the impressionable years of young adulthood (see *e.g.* Bove et al., 2022). Using a large survey of US college students, they observe that students who attend a college with a larger share of affluent students become less supportive of redistributive taxation. That result suggests that interacting with affluent peers during their formative years can prompt students to acquire or reinforce norms held by affluent adults and leave a durable mark on the policy views of voters and future decision makers.

Exposure to democratic social norms can affect nothing less than the support for democracy itself. At the macroeconomic level, Spilimbergo (2009) reports panel-data evidence that countries with more students studying in foreign democratic countries, and foreign democratic countries only, tend to become more democratic. At the microeconomic level, there is evidence that migrants exposed to democratic norms tend to be more willing to express discontent with corruption in Cape Verde (Batista and Vicente, 2011) and be politically active in Mexico (Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow, 2010) especially if they lived in democratic countries. Using exit polls of Malians voters in France, Ivory Coast, and Mali, Chauvet et al. (2016) moreover observe that Malian migrants are more critical of their country's institutions in France but not in Ivory Coast, further emphasizing the role of norms in the host country.

Social norms can moreover directly pertain to voting for a specific party or candidate. Lagios et al. (2022) study whether demonstrating against a far-right candidate can reduce votes for that candidate. They argue that demonstrations can signal or reinforce the existing norm that voting for a far-right candidate is socially undesirable and therefore affect voting outcomes. To test that

presumption, they focus on the 2002 French runoff presidential elections which pitted far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen against the incumbent, Jacques Chirac. They leverage the fact that before the second round of voting, demonstrators protested Le Pen's quest for power with roughly 300 demonstrations across the country. Using the weather to instrument participation in the demonstrations and establish causality, they find that larger protests reduced the number of votes for Le Pen, as well as and the number of abstentions and blank/invalid ballots. Most of all, matching demonstrations with data from a survey that was carried out after the second round, they find that a larger demonstration in a respondent's municipality reduced the probability of that respondent reporting having voted for the far-right candidate in the first round of the election. As the first round was held ten days *before* the demonstrations, this finding implies that larger demonstrations reduced the willingness of respondents to truthfully report having voted for the far-right candidate. In other words, the demonstrations reinforced the norm against voting for such a candidate. Whereas, the finding pertains to a survey, the same mechanism likely affected votes, despite ballots being secret, because people often discuss and reveal their votes. Gerber et al.'s (2013) observe that 87 percent of the American population report that they are asked for whom they voted at least sometimes and 84.4 percent truthfully reveal their vote to a close friend almost all the time and 9.8 more percent most of the time.

## **How elections affect social norms**

While most of the literature has historically studied how social norms affect electoral outcomes, a more recent strand of research studies exactly the opposite. The idea here is that elections can reveal novel information on the electorate leading people to update expectations about either the share of the relevant population conforming to a certain norm, or the share of the population expecting people to conform to that norm. As a result, the norm itself may change.

If the first documented effect of elections on social norms was reported for US presidential elections in the US, there is now evidence that those elections also affected norms in other countries. Finally, the effect has now also been illustrated for domestic elections across the world.

### *Donald Trump and norms in the US*

The win of Donald Trump was an unexpected major historical event. It revealed that a majority of American voters who turned out in the 2016 election considered him to be an acceptable president. Donald Trump was underestimated in electoral polls, and such a bias has been attributed to the unwillingness of respondents to accurately report their vote intention for fear of being stigmatized by the interviewers. The electoral outcome revealed that a silent majority had come out, leading to normalizing some of the heretofore most contentious items in Trump's political supply. In more

abstract terms, the election of Donald Trump might have led individuals to update their expectations about the share of the population holding and expecting people to conform to the social norm of racial equality and on how to behave with women. It accordingly spurred a literature on how his surprise election affected social norms.

Huang and Low (2016) performed the same BoS game experiment before and after Donald Trump's election. In line with the hypothesis that Donald Trump's election affected social norms of behaviour towards women, they observed that the aggressiveness of men towards women sharply increased right after the election.

Bursztyjn et al. (2020) theoretically analyse the dynamics of how electoral outcomes may normalize previously stigmatized political stances. They argue that while social norms are generally sticky, the extent to which individuals perceive the need to comply with them can unravel fast as new information about the share of the population holding a certain stance becomes available. In line with their theoretical model, using experiments, they find that Donald Trump's victory increased individuals' willingness to publicly donate to a xenophobic association. They also find, using a dictator game, that individuals are less willing to sanction others who donated to that xenophobic association if they live in an area where Donald Trump was more popular.

#### *US Presidential elections and norms in the rest of the world*

Giani and Méon (2021) show that the effect of Donald Trump's election affected norms outside of the borders of the United States. They observe that in several European countries the willingness to report a racist bias in immigration attitudes increased right after his election and provide evidence that this effect is indeed causal. Giani and Méon (2021) also show that the effect is symmetric across the identity of the President-elect: when Barack Obama was elected for the first time the exact opposite happened to the willingness to report racist attitudes. This latter finding is in line with previous analysis from Welsh and Siegelman (2011), demonstrating that reports of racist attitudes among white Americans decreased after Barack Obama was elected in 2008, a phenomenon called the "Obama effect" and ascribed to changing acceptability of racially biased self-report.

As a symmetric to Giani and Méon's (2021) finding and using a similar empirical strategy, Turnbull-Dugarte and Rama (2022) show that Donald Trump's 2020 defeat reduced self-reported support for Spanish far-right party VOX.

#### *Domestic elections in other countries*

The elections of American presidents are not the only ones that have been found to affect social norms. For instance, Dinas et al. (2022) document that the 2017 Catalan referendum resulted in a previously stigmatized display of the national flag. Using list experiments, they further show that exposure to those flags increased the willingness of respondents to report their support for the



dictator Franco. Specifically, Spanish flags worked as a coordination mechanism, eroding anti-authoritarian social norms and making the approval of Francoism more acceptable.

By the same token, Toha et al. (2021) document the interaction of social norms in Indonesia drawing from a survey experiment conducted during the 2019 Indonesian presidential election. They find that respondents who had been exposed to a statistic revealing the social acceptability of intolerance reported more intolerant views.

The possibility that election outcomes affect social norms by making it less or more stigmatized to publicly report certain attitudes or behaviours was finally also reported for Germany by Gerling and Kellermann (2022). They find that whenever far-right party AfD performed better in a state election than was predicted in pre-election polls, survey respondents in other states were more likely to report that they would vote for AfD in the next federal election. Gerling and Kellermann's (2022) results show how an accumulation of local election results can gradually erode a social norm stigmatizing voting for a far-right party at the national level.

### **Taking stock: What we know and what we would like to know**

Based on a wide array of methods, the empirical evidence shows that social norms matter for electoral behaviour in two ways: by affecting turnout and by directly affecting electoral outcomes. The opposite causal link is also receiving increasing empirical validation: electoral behaviour has the potential to change social norms by providing an opportunity for expressing one's true preferences thereby informing others about the extent to which certain social norms are held by the public.

The literature therefore suggests that norms are powerful drivers of political behaviour and documents changes in norms that are unintended consequences of electoral outcomes. By contrast, little is known about the policies or actions that would allow maintaining and fostering socially desirable norms in the political realm. Demonstrations may be one, but other private initiatives and public policies may be effective too. They should be the focus of future research.

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