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

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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 (Roberts, 2009). This trend of low voter turnout is predicted to continue and poses an impending threat to our democracy. The present study extended previous work by investigating the combined effect of descriptive norms and holding a minority or majority political viewpoint on citizens' intention to vote and responsibility to vote. Two hundred eighty-three U.S. 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 manipulated expected turnout (large, average, small) and percentage of registered Democrats in the state (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 the intention to vote. This experiment suggests that positive descriptive norms and awareness of holding a minority political viewpoint can be powerful tools in motivating citizens to vote.

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