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**Can Voter Turnout Improve from Social Pressure?**

We often hear from American voters, young and old, that they cannot imagine that their single vote can make a difference. Voter turnout in this country in the last three presidential elections was 51%, 55%, and 58%. Although on the rise in the most popular of elections, clearly many Americans have no incentive to vote. Taking a broader view, collective action requires that an individual have incentive to make an impact for a collective cause. For years political scientists have studied the questions of collective action when large numbers are asked to contribute to a public good. Therein lies the mystery regarding voting—something very large numbers of people do vote, but there is consistent, strong belief that it does not matter if one votes or not. **That any one person’s contribution to the cause is negligible and the outcome can be enjoyed by people who do not contribute, collective action fizzles. This grim framework is often applied to voting by individuals who are asked to expend time and effort, yet have little chance of casting a pivotal vote {{915 Downs, Anthony 1957/s295;}}.**

The fact that large numbers of people do in fact vote has led scholars to theorize about the **“selective incentives”--** olson article p 13--that induce people to participate in elections. One hypothesis is that people derive intrinsic satisfaction from casting their ballots. They either enjoy the act of voting per se or feel good about themselves for advancing a partisan cause or honoring a civic obligation. A second hypothesis, and the focus of this paper, posits that people receive side-payments when they contribute to a collective cause. In electoral systems where bribes and other material inducements are rare, incentives are thought to be social in nature: voters are rewarded by “payment” in the form of approbation of others, while nonvoters are criticized or shunned. In other words, **people are rewarded or punished according to whether they comply with social norms** (page 39 of the Cialdini source) such as the expectation that citizens ought to participate in elections.

When scholars use “social pressure,” they have in mind communications that play upon a basic human drive to win praise and avoid chastisement. Social pressure can be exerted by either praise or by scorning those who violate the promise. In practice, social pressure to vote varies from draconian to discreet. At one extreme are policies and programs designed to shame those who fail to vote. At various times and places, **governments and newspapers have made a point of chastising non-voters** (Gerber 2008 p35). At the other end of the spectrum are gentle reminders to do one’s civic duty by participating in elections. Somewhere in between are messages that subtly inform recipients that whether they vote is public information by thanking them for participating in a recent election. Candidates obtain lists of voters after an election of who turned out to vote. One local campaign consultant, Mark Grebner developed a direct mail letter to let a community know whether their neighbors voted or not. Grebner was banking on a premise that voters are ashamed of abstaining, but think that no one will know and they can therefore get away with it.

**I never met a voter that needed reminding to vote, since none ever said they were surprised to be told it was election day. Also, everyone thinks voting is a good thing, even a duty. But some of them—I later found by checking records—still failed to vote. There is a large fraction of people who falsely claimed to have voted, as reported by surveys following each November election. They think voting is essentially a private act, rather than a public one, and it was safe to routinely misreport voting not only to researchers but to friends and family. That would explain why reminding voters with phone calls was ineffective; they are simply avoiding. I tested this by seeing if the threat of public exposure would force at least some of the non-voters to vote by making them think they couldn’t continue to get away with claiming that they did when they did not.** (email from him)

These mailings, which Grebner designed and sent to 80,000 households, demonstrated that voter turnout increases as social pressure increases. When maximum social pressure is applied, a single mailing increased the probability of voting by more than 8% points, which is an astonishingly large effect that rivals even the effect of fact-to-face contact with a canvasser. **Direct mail rarely increases turnout by more than 1%.**  (that article by green & gerber 2008)

Downs, who wrote that voting is “inherently costly” based on time spent from registration, to determining who is running, to casting the actual ballot, p265-- never factored any social element into his costs. **However, he did assert that if voting that is costless—p273-- then everyone would vote**. One could conclude then that Downs’ model is intact and applies to ……