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CIVIC NORMS, SOCIAL SANCTIONS, AND VOTER TURNOUT

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I. Introduction

The economic approach to the study of politics has made notable contributions to the theory of the state, of bureaucracy, and of party competition, and to the study of problems in preference revelation, preference aggregation, and the properties of voting rules.[i] An embarrassing limitation of the economic approach to politics, however, is its failure to account for the individual decision to vote in large elections.

A fundamental assumption of public choice is that people are egoistic, rational utility maximizers (Mueller, 1989, 2). Since elections are rarely close enough for a single vote to make a crucial difference in the outcome, voting is highly unlikely to be an efficient use of time and resources in attaining one's political goals (Benn, 1979, 292). If voting requires even a small investment in time and effort, "a reflective voter must conclude, as he is going to the polling place, that whatever impels him there, it is not the impact of his vote on the outcome" (Coleman, 1990, 289). The problem, then, is to reconcile observed high rates of voting turnout with the rationality postulate, or alternatively to explain why people persist in voting in spite of its irrationality.

The standard political behavior literature on turnout does not suffer from this embarrassing failure to predicted observed participation levels, but has inadequate theoretical

grounding. The role of "resources" such as time, money, and information as inputs to participation is stresses, but little attention is paid to the problem of voters' motivations.[ii] The incentives bringing voters to the polls must be identified given the free-rider disincentives highlighted by the economic approach. That some people have the "resources" to vote is at best an incomplete explanation of turnout; an entrepreneur may possess the resources to undertake an investment he recognizes would be unprofitable, but will clearly refrain from doing so. A focus on resources is further undercut by empirical findings in the turnout literature. The unemployed, who have the most "free" time (or the lowest opportunity cost of time, from an economist's point of view), vote at significantly lower rates than the employed, even when differences in education and other relevant variables are controlled for (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).

II. Voter Turnout and The Logic of Collective Action

That the decision to vote cannot in general be accounted for by any expected impact on political outcomes can be viewed as an illustration of Olson's logic of collective action: one's contribution to a collective good will result in an increase in the public goods benefits accruing to the contributor too small to cover the costs of the contribution. Olson's (1965)

by-product theory of collective action argued that any contribution by a rational self-interested individual toward a public good must be the result of private or selective incentives received in exchange for the contribution, since the individual receives the benefits of the public good independently of that contribution.

Material incentives have often had an important role in inducing turnout, especially in the case of "machine politics" predominating in the U.S. in earlier periods and in certain other countries today. Political machines are structured so that "party hacks" are rewarded by the organization for their success in turning out voters, who are often supplied with transportation to the polls, and offered cash, jobs, contracts, or government services in exchange for their votes (Uhlaner, 1986, 562; Barry, 1970, 35; Olson, 1965, 164-165). Material rewards such as cash or patronage surely account for only a tiny portion of turnout in contemporary American national elections, however, pointing to the importance of "solidary" and "purposive" incentives:

"Solidary incentives are intangible costs and benefits of a social nature deriving, for example, from friendship, camaraderie, recreational activity, status, social pressure, or a sense of belonging. Purposive incentives

are intangible costs and benefits ultimately grounded on
values of a suprapersonal nature, e.g., notions of right
and wrong, moral or religious principles, political
ideology, and notions of fairness and justice." (Moe,
1980, 615, emphasis in original)

Uhlaner (1986, 1989a, 1989b) and Morton (1991) have
developed models of voter participation based on purposive and
solidary incentives. In these models, group leaders provide
purposive incentives, and create group structures in which
solidary incentives can arise, in exchange for contributions
to the group in the form of votes for the group's favored
candidate. A member votes if his costs of voting are less than
the sum of his "costs" incurred in violating group participatory
norms and his rewards gained from abiding by these norms. The
more one candidate is preferred by the group to the opposition,
the more resources a leader will expend on stressing the duty
of members to vote, thereby increasing the group's voting
turnout. Rewards and sanctions available to group leaders
include "enhanced feelings of being a good person" and
"ostracism directed against abstainers" (Uhlaner, 1989a, 398).

Uhlaner stresses the role of political parties, interest
groups, and reference groups in mobilizing turnout through a

sense of group loyalty and duty, arguing (1986, 570) that "tendencies toward group affiliation" are "basic." There is good reason to question, however, whether loyalty to these groups is the primary source of the widespread sense of duty to vote.

There is strong evidence that in the U.S. in the second half of the 19th century parties and reference groups were the major agents of voter mobilization (Piven and Cloward, 1988; Kleppner, 1982). Party organizations have weakened considerably in the United States since then, however (Kleppner, 1982; Teixeira, 1987, ch. 1). Survey measures of partisan identification indicate a severe erosion in the strength of party loyalties since 1960 (Miller and Traugott, 1989, 81).

Dennis (1970) discovers strong support for the institutions of elections and for the norm of voting duty, with most of his Wisconsin survey respondents indicating that a citizen should vote even if he thinks his vote won't make a difference, or if he believes his party has no chance of winning, or if he doesn't care who wins. On the other hand, Dennis finds little support for the party system. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the parties "confuse the issues" and "create conflicts where none really exist" (1970, 831). Dennis concludes:

"The average member of the public will more likely have
internalized the norms of electoral participation than
those of partisan competition...Voting and elections are
'us'; parties are 'them.'" (832)

A consistent 90-plus percent of National Election Studies
respondents from 1952 to 1980 (when the item was dropped from
the survey) disagreed with the statement, "It isn't so important
to vote when you know your party doesn't have any chance of
winning." Apparently, helping to elect one's favored
candidate is not the only reason, or even the primary reason,
for voting for most citizens.

At least in the contemporary United States, a sense of
civic duty based on affiliation with the society as a whole
appears to be the key variable accounting for the participation
of the many citizens without strong or exclusive loyalties to
politically active interest groups, reference groups, or
parties. The group-mobilization models of Uhlaner and Morton
suffer, in this view, from a misplaced emphasis on
provincialism.

Weisberg and Grofman (1981) and Schram (1989) find support
for a voting model in which individuals first decide whether
or not to vote, and then decide who to vote for, contradicting

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Uhlaner's (1986, 560) dubious assertion that "transitions between voting and abstaining occur more easily than those between voting for opposing candidates." A two-stage model in which candidate evaluation takes place after the decision to vote is made is more consistent with a dominant role for <u>civic</u> duty to vote than with a model in which incentives to vote provided by group leaders vary depending on candidates' platforms.

Voting participation is not only a partisan or group public good; it is also widely perceived as a societal or national public good: sufficiently low turnouts "can conceivably cause democracy to break down" (Downs, 1957, 268) as highly unpopular candidates could be elected. Mass political involvement is also believed to help keep leaders accountable to the citizenry: "Democratic institutions owe their survival to the keen participation of citizens in the life of the polity" (Chapman and Palda, 1983, 337). Democratic theorists teach that a democracy can function well "only if a substantial part of its electorate exercises the right to vote, and maintains a political vigilance" as expressed by party activism, and by letters written to government representatives and newspapers (Benn, 1979, 292).

This view of turnout levels as a national public good is supported by polling evidence. In a nationwide ABC-Harvard

survey conducted in 1983, 77 percent of respondents agreed that "no matter who wins, the more people who go to the polls, the better off our democracy will be." Nearly all of these indicated "a strong belief" in the statement. Even among respondents who were not currently registered to vote and admitted that they rarely if ever voted (the "rarelies"), 61% agreed that higher turnout is good for the country, with more than 80% of these indicating a strong belief (Alderman, 1983). The fact that approximately one-fourth of nonvoters falsely report having voted to NES interviewers (Silver, Anderson, and Abramson, 1986) further indicates the duty to vote is primarily a <u>civic</u> norm and not a special-interested norm. 551).

III. Social Sanctions and Voter Turnout

The role of interpersonal pressures to vote has received little attention in the theoretical literature on turnout, and virtually none in the empirical literature. While perhaps of less importance in the context of voting than "internal" sanctions associated with the sense of civic duty to vote, "external" sanctions from friends, relatives, and other associates appear to play a major role in overcoming collective action problems in other settings (see Olson, 1965). In contrast to internalized restraints, which involve "processes

of conscience or superego, the pain of guilt feelings, and the fear of supernatural sanctions," social sanctions include "face-to-face approval and disapproval, ostracism, conformity pressure, shame and pride" (Campbell, 1982, 434). While internal sanctions such as guilt requires only one's own knowledge of one's behavior, external sanctions require knowledge by others of one's behavior. Despite difficulties in monitoring the turnout of others, anecdotal and polling evidence provides some indication that interpersonal pressures to vote are worthy of further investigation. If the fear of shame and ostracism can induce men to fight in battles (Keegan, 1976), surely it can be strong enough to induce them to vote. In an ABC-Harvard poll conducted in 1983 (Alderman, 1983), 37 percent of respondents--including 41 percent of regular voters--cited as a reason for voting the statement: "My friends and relatives almost always vote and I'd feel uncomfortable telling them I hadn't voted."[iii]

Previous models of interpersonal pressures to vote (Uhlaner, 1989b; Schram, 1989; Coleman, 1990) are based on group or partisan norms. High turnout among group members benefits them by helping to elect the group's favored candidates; social pressures arise to limit free rider behavior harmful to the group.

Social pressures may also be derived from _civic_ duty. In

this view, persons with particularly intense feelings of loyalty and obligation to society, or who are especially well-socialized, "enforce" voting norms through their willingness to express disapproval at non-voting. Social sanctions thus permit a certain amount of "substitutability" of feelings of duty, as someone with a low sense of civic obligation may nonetheless vote to avoid displeasing a friend or relative with a stronger sense of duty. For the individual, then, voter participation is a function of one's own sense of duty, of the strength of duty of one's family, friends, and other associates, and of the frequency and quality of interaction with these potential enforcers. The relevance of social sanctions for an individual requires that he associates with at least some high-duty persons whose respect he values.

There is little or no solid evidence in the turnout literature that interpersonal pressures matter. Cassel and Hill (1981, 193) briefly outline a "peer interaction" theory of turnout but concede that it "cannot be tested at present because relevant survey data do not exist." They overlook items included in selected NES surveys that provide some support for the importance of external sanctions. In addition to this NES data, this section also presents evidence from a 1990 post-election "Social Sanctions Survey" of Prince George's County, Maryland, and Shelby County, Tennessee residents,

conducted by the author, which focused on interpersonal pressures to vote.[iv]

Married persons are almost invariably found to vote more than single, separated, or widowed persons (e.g., Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Teixeira, 1987). Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980, 44) cite marriage as "by far the most important source" of interpersonal influence on turnout decisions. There may also be economies of scale in information and transportation associated with marriage, however: "those who are married and living with their spouses can share the physical costs of voting (like registering and traveling to the polling booth), as well as the task of deciding between candidates" (Teixeira, 1987, 23). No attempts have been made to separate the cost-reducing and interpersonal effects of marital status.

NES surveys routinely inquire about the education of the respondent's spouse. The probability of the respondent voting varies positively with the spouse's education. This result appears to be consistent with either of the proposed arguments: a highly-educated spouse is likely to have a strong sense of duty and thereby influence the respondent's decision to vote, but having a well-educated and informed spouse may also lower one's costs of registering and locating the polling place. The latter case is undermined, however, by Nagler's (1991) discovery that the deterrent effect of registration barriers

is <u>not</u> correlated with education, as had been previously believed due to flawed methodology (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).

Further evidence of the impact of external sanctions associated with marriage is obtained using a more direct approach in the Social Sanctions Survey (SSS). To determine one's general willingness to enforce voting norms, respondents were asked in the survey whether, upon discovering that a friend did not vote in the election, (1) "I would disapprove, and let him or her know," (2) "I would disapprove, and keep it to myself," or if (3) "It wouldn't matter to me at all." Married respondents were asked whether or not their spouse had voted. The choice of option (1), the "enforcement" option, is associated with an average 21-percentage point increase in the probability of reporting that one's spouse had voted, or would vote. Of course, disapproving respondents may be exaggerating the likelihood of their spouse voting. A similar degree of overreporting should be associated with the choice of option (2) however, which also indicated disapproval of non-voting. But passive disapproval is associated with only a (not statistically significant) 12-point increase in reported voting of spouses. The high potential among marriage partners for active disapproval of the violation of voting norms appears to account for the major portion of the marital status-turnout

connection.

Residential mobility has a strong effect on turnout, as the likelihood of one voting increases with length of residence at one's current address (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Mobility has been regarded as an important indicator of social connectedness (Crewe et. al., 1977; Conway, 1985; Pomper and Sernekos, 1989). It is usually interpreted as a cost variable, however (Silver, 1973; Cassel and Hill, 1981); movers must learn where and how to re-register and to vote. Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass (1987) find that the effect of mobility is not consistently and significantly lower among survey respondents residing in states allowing election-day registration, i.e., those states in which the cost effects of mobility should be lowest. This result indicates that mobility may not be solely a cost variable, but provides no direct evidence for the importance of social pressures from neighbors and neighborhood institutions to vote.

Neighborhood influences on turnout can be more directly studied using the Major Panel of the 1980 NES survey, which includes a set of questions designed to probe the political effects of respondents' interactions with their neighbors (Eulau and Rothenberg, 1986, 130). Eulau and Rothenberg (1986) found these interactions to have only modest effects on voter choices between candidates, but did not examine neighborhood

influences on the decision to vote or abstain.

Major Panel respondents were asked to list up to three people "living in this neighborhood with whom you or your family get together." Not all respondents were able to list three; 22 percent replied that they did not associate with any of their neighbors. Respondents were asked whether, they, in general, agreed with each of these neighbors on politics, and also were asked which candidate each neighbor planned to vote for; some respondents volunteered that a particular neighbor did not plan to vote. The probability of the respondent voting is found to increase by an average of about 3.5 percentage points for each neighbor cited who is expected to vote, and who generally agrees with the respondent politically.

Other neighborhood level indicators increasing the probability of voting include attending church in one's neighborhood (by an average 6 percentage points, and the presence of a Democratic or Republican party organization in the neighborhood (7.5 percentage points). Independently of these neighborhood variables, residing at one's current address one year or less reduces the probability of voting by about 9.5 percentage points.

In the SSS respondents claiming to "know and occasionally talk to" three or more people in their neighborhoods are significantly more likely to have voted than those knowing two

or fewer. With this "knows-one's-neighbors variable included
in the turnout regression, length of residence is not
statistically significant.

Two summary measures of respondents' sense of civic duty
to vote and subjectivity to social sanctions are found to be
the most powerful predictors of turnout in the SSS.
Respondents indicating it is "very important" to "still go out
to vote" even if "your candidate or party doesn't have any chance
of winning" were coded as high civic duty (70 percent of the
sample). Respondents were divided into high and low social
sanctions categories by "yes" (42 percent) or "no" replies to
the question: "Do you have any friends, neighbors, or relatives
who would be disappointed or angry with you if they knew you
had not voted in this year's elections?"

IV. **Turnout as Socially Cooperative Behavior**

An ideal data set would include, in addition to the NES
independent or causal variables influencing turnout, data on
"co-dependent" variables, i.e., other forms of social
cooperation. The view of voting turnout as norm-governed
behavior in a collective action setting would be further
supported by evidence that voters were, for example, less likely
to commit crimes and more likely to use their turn signals in
traffic than were nonvoters. Results from the Social Sanctions

Survey and the 1972 NES, as well as several sources of aggregate data, provide some support for this view.

Tyler (1990) summarizes evidence indicating that compliance with laws is influenced at least as much by feelings of obligation and peer disapproval as by the threat of legal sanctions. At the state level, the crime rate is inversely correlated with turnout (r = -.43). The correlation coefficient between turnout and crime is -.30 at the neighborhood level in the District of Columbia.[v]

The 1990 census mail response rates by state are correlated even more highly with turnout (r = .56) than are crime rates. The Social Sanctions Survey establishes this turnout-census response relationship at the individual level, with voting in past presidential elections and in the 1990 mid-term election both correlated with having mailed in the census form.

State-level data on charitable contributions is not available. The SSS links charitable giving and voter participation at the individual level, however: contributions are correlated with having voted in the 1990 elections and with past presidential voting. As with voting, charitable giving and responding to the census are associated in the SSS with items measuring sense of loyalty or indebtedness to society, sense of obligation to vote, enforcement of voting norms, and the summary social sanctions indicator.

The 1972 NES asked respondents about their membership and activity in various types of organizations. Turnout is correlated as or more strongly with activity in the PTA ($r =$ .144), civic groups generally (.117), neighborhood associations (.084), and charitable organizations (.079), than with involvement in political organizations (.100), business organizations (.086), and special interest groups (.070).[vi]

V. The American Turnout Decline

The low turnout in 20th century U.S. national elections compared to 19th century elections, or to elections in other present-day democracies, has been convincingly attributed to legal and institutional differences (Piven and Cloward, 1988; Kleppner, 1982). A legal-institutional approach fails to account for the more moderate but sizeable post-1960 turnout decline, however. This period has witnessed the removal of many barriers to registration and voting. Poll taxes and literacy tests have been eliminated, mail-in registration for all eligible voters has been introduced in nearly half of the states, election-day polling hours have been lengthened, and absentee voting eligibility has been broadened. Residency requirements have been drastically reduced in most states, and the period before election day in which the registration books are closed has been shortened in many states. Yet, turnout in

presidential elections has steadily declined from about 63 percent in 1960 to about 50 percent in 1988.

Perhaps the most commonly advanced explanation of the turnout decline is voter cynicism and disillusionment generated by Vietnam and Watergate, the rise of PACs, and negative campaigning. Analyses of NES data typically show little or no relationship between turnout and measures of political cynicism and trust in government, however. Furthermore, while the number of NES respondents indicating they trusted the government and believed it is run "for the benefit of all the people" fell drastically at about the time of Watergate, there was no clear trend either before or since the mid-1970s (Miller and Traugott, 1989).

In contrast to the measure of trust in government, an indicator of trust in people is highly correlated cross-sectionally with turnout. Agreement with the statement "most people can be trusted" increases the probability of voting by 6.5 percentage points on average, relative to the reference attitude that "you can't be too careful in dealing with people." Trust in government, on the other hand, has no effect on turnout.

Furthermore, trust in people has the right time trend: Americans are becoming more mistrustful of their fellow citizens. In all three polls (including NES and other surveys) conducted in the 1960's that asked this question, at least 53

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percent of respondents agreed that people were generally trustworthy. In the 17 surveys conducted since 1970, the figure reached as high as 51 percent only once (in 1976), and has often dipped into the upper thirties (Niemi, Mueller, and Smith, 1989). The relationship between turnout and trust in people suggests that for many citizens, voting may be governed in part by "conditional cooperation": they will themselves vote, refrain from littering, etc., if and only if "enough" others are doing their fair share of public-interested acts (Hardin, 1982, ch. 6). The presence of a sufficient number of conditional cooperators can create the potential for a snowballing effect on turnout of a small initial decline in feelings of civic duty, or in interpersonal pressures to vote.

There is a consensus in studies of recent turnout decline that another attitudinal variable of paramount importance in cross-individual analysis has not contributed to the turnout decline: "although feelings of civic duty are consistently and strongly related to turnout, there has been no decline in such feelings" (Abramson and Aldrich, 1982, 504; also see Cassel and Hill, 1981, 183).

Civic duty has been dismissed too easily, however. It did fall slightly between 1960 and 1980 (Miller and Traugott, 1989, 284), when 3 of the 4 duty items in the NES were dropped from the survey. Even assuming that strength of civic duty has

remained roughly constant since 1960, and that this implies duty played no part in the turnout drop, it is puzzling why civic duty did not <u>strengthen</u> significantly over the period, as would be expected from the enormous rise in average education of the American citizenry over this period. Miller (1980, 29) more than a decade ago argued that trends already underway in the age distribution, education, income, and occupation "may be expected to enhance citizens' sense of civic obligation" and thereby "produce an increase in voting turnout."

Finally, the impact of a given level of citizen duty on turnout may vary across individuals and over time, as external sanctions associated with violation of the duty to vote may vary. Miller (1980, 20) finds "the decline in election day voting has been concentrated very <u>disproportionately</u> in those sectors of the electorate in which one has always found the least political interest and a lack of sense of civic virtue" (emphasis in original). This pattern is exactly what would be expected if there were reduced interpersonal pressure to vote resulting from weakened attachments to family, neighbors, and community institutions such as churches, political parties, and other voluntary organizations. People who vote primarily because of the expectations of others rather than because of an internally-felt obligation will be those most likely to drop out of the electorate when the expectations of others begin to

matter less.

When social pressure to vote is considered, the relationship between civic duty and the decision to vote becomes less simple than assumed in the standard literature. Individual A may vote in one election and fail to vote in the next one because of a weakened sense of duty--but it may be individual B's duty that weakened. Alternatively, A and B may both have an unchanged sense of duty between the two elections, but B has moved 2000 miles away, sparing A the choice between bearing the costs of voting or incurring B's disapproval.

If significant external sanctions are associated with civic duty, as argued above, a weakening of attachments to family and community in the U.S. may contribute to turnout decline. Where social networks are less dense, establishing and maintaining sanctioning systems for norm conformity is more problematic (Coleman, 1990, ch. 11). Civic duty may thus be responsible for attracting many fewer voters to the polls -- even if the strength of civic duty itself has not declined overall -- when the importance of social pressures to vote is recognized. Anecdotal and statistical evidence indicates a general weakening of social attachments has occurred in the U.S. in recent years. It is often lamented that many Americans no longer know their neighbors. Declining fertility and increased female labor force participation have reduced the

opportunities for social interaction within neighborhoods.

Membership in church-affiliated group has fallen from 42 percent of General Social Survey respondents in 1974, when the question was first asked, to 30 percent in 1987. The number of subjects claiming no memberships in any of the various groups inquired about in the GSS rose from 25 percent in 1974 to 32 percent in 1987 (Niemi, Mueller, and Smith, 1989).

Marital status also has been shown to play a part in the downward voting trend. The rise in number of people remaining single has been shown to contribute to the 1960-1980 turnout decline by Teixeira (1987, 73). In 1960, 80 percent of NES respondents were married and living with their spouses; this figure had dropped to 61 percent by 1980 and to 54.7 percent by 1988. Census figures show a rise in the number of adults who are single, separated, or widowed from 28.3 percent in 1970 to 37.3 percent in 1988 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990).

Declining social connectedness may influence the strength of internal, as well as external, pressures to vote. There is reason to believe that high postwar mobility rates, along with other social structural changes, have diminished the incentives of parents and other adult relatives to socialize their children to behave in socially approved ways:

"Any aspect of social structure which reduces the degree

to which the child's later actions will benefit or harm
the family's interests (such as residence in a more
anonymous urban setting as compared to a small-town
setting, or geographic mobility and discontinuity in
family life) should weaken the relation between the
family's interest in its status and the degree to which
socialization practices incorporate internal sanctions.
Thus, as these conditions proliferate...persons in future
generations will be decreasingly socialized (Coleman,
1990, 298)."

This argument may be a partial solution to the case of the
missing duty discussed above.

The decline of the extended family, and even of the
nuclear family with rises in the divorce rate and the labor force
participation rate of mothers, may contribute to weakened
socialization of civic responsibilities and partisanship. As
Urie Bronfenbrenner argues (Woodward and Malamud, 1975):

"In recent decades a number of developments--many
themselves beneficent--have conspired to isolate the
family and to reduce drastically the number of relatives,
neighbors and other caring adults who used to share in the
socialization of American children."

Even as recently as 1970, only 14.8 percent of children under 18--11.5% of whites, and 41.5% of blacks--did not live with two parents. In 1988, the comparable figure was 27.3 percent--21.1% of whites, and 61.4% of blacks (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). In 1960, only 18.6 percent of married mothers with children under 6 worked outside the home; this figure increased to over 57 percent by 1988 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). Many children from these one-parent or two-worker households have entered the voting-age population in recent years.

When an individual's socializing agents are incongruent in their party loyalties, the individual's strength of partisanship tends to be weakened. A group- or partisan-based voting norm "should become weaker as the political bias of voter's association declines" (Coleman, 1990, 828). In 1970 only 18 percent of children surveyed reported having parents who disagreed in their partisanship; by 1980 one-third said they came from such politically split families (Brown, 1988, 113).

Abramson and Aldrich (1982, 507) find weakened party identification accounts for 2.5 percentage points of the total 10.2 percentage point decline in presidential voting between 1960 and 1980 (also see Cassel and Hill, 1981; and Teixeira, 1987, ch. 4). High post-war mobility rates and changing family

structure may provide part of the explanation for the partisanship decline.

It is difficult to construct a satisfactory empirical test of the causes of turnout decline: there is little or no time series data on interpersonal pressures to vote. To the extent that diminishing social sanctions for nonvoting are not captured due to lack of data availability (e.g., on the reduced presence of extended family members), the portion of the recent American turnout decline unaccounted for by the usual models should be growing over time. Teixeira (1987) discovers precisely this pattern (using NES data), and is able to offer little speculation as to its cause.

VI. The Erosion of Social Cooperation

Certain time-series data on other forms of socially cooperative behavior in the U.S. offer further support for the view that the turnout drop has been caused in large part by a weakening of social norms and associated internal and external sanctions, rather than by narrowly political causes such as cynicism and disillusionment associated with Watergate and other events.

The census mail-in response rate fell from about 75 percent in 1980 to about 63 percent in 1990, a drop that surprised Census Bureau officials, requiring much larger field enumeration

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efforts than anticipated.

Controlling for other factors known to influence voter participation, residing in a jurisdiction selecting jurors from voter registration lists reduces the probability of being registered to vote by 9 percentage points on average. There is some evidence that this deterrent impact on voter participation of choosing jurors from registration lists has grown over time; more citizens are evading one civic obligation to escape another than in previous times (Knack, 1991).

Fewer Americans read a daily newspaper (Teixeira, 1987) or watch national news programs on television than formerly. Daily newspaper readership fell to 51 percent of adults in 1988 from 73 percent in 1967 (Niemi, Mueller, and Smith, 1989). The combined Nielsen rating of the three major networks' evening news programs is down by about 25 percent from its levels of only 10 years ago (Nielsen Media Research, 1990). Only a small fraction of the ratings decline in network news viewing is attributable to increased viewing of cable news programs.

Controlling for personal income, age distribution, stock prices, and political climate, a time trend variable is found by Nelson (1986) to have "a strong independent and statistically significant" downward effect on charitable contributions. The effect of the time trend variable accounts for an annual rate of decline of 3.6 percent in giving over the 1948-1982 period.

Nelson's model does not include tax inducement variables, however, so that any changes in the tax price of giving are reflected in his time trend variable. Two studies by Feldstein (1975, 1976) using independent data sets find time trend variables remain significant in models containing tax price variables, with an annual decline in the propensity to give of 1.4 percent over the 1948-1968 period, and an average decline of between 1 percent and 1.8 percent per year from 1962 to 1970. Furthermore, Nelson finds an acceleration in the annual rate of decrease over the 1948-1982 period: the coefficient on a time-squared variable indicates a rate of decline for the beginning year of 3.58 percent and a fall for the final year of 5.14 percent. This acceleration is difficult to explain in terms of changing tax inducements or "crowding-out" effects associated with increases in the charitable role of government.

Finally, the fall in turnout is consistent with widespread impressions of a decline in "common" courtesy, and of more frequent violations of driver etiquette, with an observed increase in the selfishness of professional and college athletes in team sports (Boswell, 1989), and with a "decline of comity in Congress." A study of that title (Uslaner, 1991) finds that year-to-year variations in measures of congressional amending activity are significantly correlated with year-to-year variations in charitable giving and trust in

people, and attributes the downward trend in these and other indicators to the general decline of reciprocity in America.

Each of the areas of social cooperation cited here can of course be explained in part by incentives and circumstances unique to each area of behavior, just as the turnout decline has been attributed to the effects of Vietnam and Watergate, the rise of PACs, negative campaigning, the poor quality of candidates, little differences between parties and candidates, and numerous other factors. Just as several of these rather ad hoc political explanations may not be wholly irrelevant to an explanation of the turnout decline, other ad hoc theories can no doubt be provided to explain trends in student cheating, census response rates, and driver courtesy. The "sociological" explanation offered here possesses the virtues of power and parsimony: it explains a lot with a little, relative to its opposition. With the exception of norm-based sanctions, these various collective action settings have few costs and benefits in common to account for correlations observed across units or over time.

VII. Conclusion

There is a popular tendency to speak of shifting "values" as if tastes and preferences were undergoing a widespread and autonomous change. Indeed, it is often argued that

civic-mindedness or selflessness is cyclical, and that it is only a matter of time before cooperation is in vogue again. In spite of periodic attempts in the media to proclaim an end to the era of selfishness (e.g., Barol, 1988), the "Me Decade" of the 1970's has become the "Me Generation," with few current signs of a reversion to greater selflessness.

Rather than resorting to tastes and "fads" to explain behavior, the argument here stresses primarily changing incentives and opportunities to behave selfishly (versus cooperatively), and secondarily changing incentives and opportunities for parents and other socializing agents to invest in shaping the values of children.

As residents of large and mobile societies find themselves in fewer repeated interactions with others, the benefits of following rules of thumb that prescribe cooperation are diminished. The advantages of acting in accordance with the "Golden Rule" are less apparent when others rarely have the opportunity to "do unto you."

According to Coleman (1990, 301):

"...social changes have moved modern society toward a structure in which individuals act more independently than they did in the past, in which individuals' goals are more independently arrived at than they were in the past, and

in which individuals' interests are more self-directed
than they were in the past."

McKean (1974, 214) argues of changes in social variables
reducing cooperative behavior:

"They do not change our taste for morality or a behavioral
code; they simply make it more costly and less rewarding
to each individual to be considerate of others, and to
adhere to customs or ethical rules."

Buchanan (1978, 367) attributes a reduction in the constraining
effect of moral rules to population increase, mobility, and
urbanization:

"Add to this the observed erosion of the family, the
church, and the law--all of which were stabilizing
influences that tend to reinforce moral precepts--and we
readily understand why "Homo economicus" has assumed such
a dominant role in modern behavior patterns."

Voting turnout thus appears to be merely an example of a class
of collective action settings in which people cooperate more
than economic theory predicts that they should--but in which

behavior corresponds more closely to that theory than it used to.

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Notes

i. See Mueller (1989) for a review of work in each of these areas.

ii. For example, see Verba and Nie (1972). A more extensive critique than that presented here of the standard approach to political participation is contained in Uhlaner (1986).

iii. In the same poll, 55 percent, including 71 percent of regular voters, identified with the statement "if I didn't vote, I'd feel guilty."

[iv]. Details of results cited here can be found in chapter 4 of Knack (1991).

v. Knack (1990a). The 180 D.C. census tracts were matched with the 140 voting precincts to form 54 "neighborhoods."

vi. Each of these relationships is statistically significant at the .001 level (N = 2133).