

The London School of Economics and Political Science

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The group-ishness of voting:

Preferences towards group membership, within-group authority,
and between-group hierarchy shape and predict the way we vote

A summary document
of this doctoral thesis by

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Summary of doctoral thesis

Attempts to understand and predict voting have often pitted potential explanations against each other: policies versus partisanship, identities versus ideologies. This thesis, instead, suggests a pluralist framework of group-ishness, which highlights the role of group membership, coordination, and competition in our political cognition and behaviour. Instead of putting prominent theories in competition with each other, research on this topic integrates group identities (i.e. national identification and partisan affiliation), orientations towards authority within a group (i.e. authoritarianism), and preferences for the distribution of rights and resources between groups (i.e. egalitarianism). This thesis provides an argument for why group-based preferences are so strongly linked to voting decisions, experimentally tests this framework with a series of survey experiments and validates it with actual election results. The findings indicate that our group-based preferences influence our voting decisions and perceptions of candidates and can also be used to predict election results. The first paper employs a discrete choice experiment and identifies shared group-based preferences as highly influential on voting decisions. Beginning with a broad consideration of social feelings, perceptions, and commitments, the first study in this paper confirms the importance of group-based preferences based on the commitment to a shared group and to principles for distributing power and resources within the shared group as well as between groups. The second paper confirms that shared group-based commitments are underlying voters' perceptions of similarity with candidates as well as vote intention, more so than shared socio-demographic characteristics. This paper also considers perceived similarity alongside the traditional candidate traits of competence and warmth, and the results indicate perceived similarity is more closely linked to vote intention than candidate warmth or competence. The third paper considers this framework within actual election contexts and explores the relative predictive ability of such a framework for vote choice and election results as compared with traditional predictors of political ideology and demographics. Overall, these findings contribute to the growing literature on the group-based foundations of our political preferences and behaviours, contributing evidence of both causal links and application to actual election contexts.

Study 1: A leader who sees the world as I do: Voters prefer candidates whose statements reveal matching social psychological attitudes

Authors: Denise Baron, Benjamin Lauderdale, & Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington

Abstract

Politicians are increasingly able to communicate their values, attitudes, and concerns directly to voters. Yet little is known about which of these signals resonate with voters, and why. We employ a discrete choice experiment to investigate whether and which social psychological attitudes predict how adult British voters respond to corresponding attitudinal signals communicated by candidates in hypothetical social media posts. For all attitudes studied, covering social feelings (trust, collective nostalgia), social perceptions (nationalism, populist sentiment), and social commitments (national identification, authoritarianism, egalitarianism), we find that participants are much more likely to vote for candidates who signal proximity to their own attitudinal position and less likely for candidates who signal opposing views. The strongest effects were observed for national identification, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism, indicating the importance of commitment to a shared group and to particular principles for distributing power and resources within and between groups. We further demonstrate that social psychological attitudes are not acting as mere proxies for participants' past votes or left-right ideology. Our results extend adaptive followership theory to incorporate preferences concerning intragroup coordination and intergroup hierarchy, while highlighting the social psychological dynamics of political communication that may transcend the concerns of particular election cycles.

Study 2: My kind of leader? Perceived similarity, vote intention, and the group-based commitments that shape them

Authors: Denise Baron, Katharina Lawall, & Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington

Abstract

Voters have unprecedented access to information about political candidates, but what candidate characteristics matter most? And do voters' characteristics condition the way they evaluate candidates? Existing literature suggests that voters seek out information about candidates to inform perceptions of key traits or to identify shared characteristics. A group-based approach suggests that we are not only seeking leaders who are similar to us or ingroup members, but also leaders who share our preferences for how groups are organised in society. This group-based approach suggests perceptions of similarity should be more important to voters than traditional candidate traits, such as warmth and competence. We investigate this with two nationally representative discrete choice experiments conducted in the United Kingdom and the United States, featuring realistic candidate profiles which vary socio-demographic, partisan, and ideological information. In terms of what underlies perceived similarity, our findings indicate voters are seeking leaders who share their commitments to certain groups (i.e. the nation and political party), ways of organising the group (i.e. authoritarianism), and ways of distributing resources and power between groups (i.e. egalitarianism) rather than leaders who simply share their demographic characteristics. We also find that perceived similarity is more strongly linked to vote intention than perceived warmth or competence. Voters identify with and want to support candidates who share their group-based commitments more so than supporting candidates who simply look like them.

Study 3: Group-based preferences predict vote choice and election results in British elections between 2015 and 2019

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Abstract

Attempts to predict election results in sub-national geographic areas often employ demographics, economic factors, and previous election results but less frequently utilise social psychological predictors. The present study proposes the use of group-based preferences, specifically national identification, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism, in predicting vote choice on the individual-level and vote share on the constituency-level in British elections between 2015 and 2019.

Previous research based on Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Dual Process Motivational (DPM) Model highlight the utility of group-based preferences as predictors of political attitudes and behaviours at the individual level; however no prior studies have examined the relationships between these orientations and British election results at the constituency-level. The three studies in this paper employ data from the British Election Study waves conducted between 2015 and 2019 for cross-sectional analysis in the first two studies and to generate constituency-level estimates of group-based preferences in the third study. In these three studies, we compare the predictive ability of group-based preferences, key demographics, and left-right ideology, finding that group-based preferences are comparable or superior predictors of (1) individual vote choice among British voters in general, (2) individual vote choice among undecided voters, and (3) constituency-level vote share as compared to key demographics and left-right ideology.