EL HÁBITO DE VOTAR: UN MARCO TEÓRICO PARA COMPRENDER EL CAMBIO Y LA ESTABILIDAD ELECTORAL

THE HABIT OF VOTING: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING ELECTORAL CHANGE AND STABILITY

Ronald Alfaro-Redondo[1]

Correo electrónico

ralfaro@estadonacion.or.cr

Costa Rican Political Scientist. Master of Arts in Quantitative Methods in the social sciences. Columbia University, New York, USA. Master of Arts in Political Science. University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. PhD Candidate in the Political Science Department. University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. Principal researcher of the Americas Barometer in Costa Rica. Researcher in Programa Estado de la Nación. Professor in the Political Science Department. University of Costa Rica.

Recibido: 28/08/13 – Aceptado: 21/03/14

Resumen

En un contexto de disminución de la participación electoral, como el experimentado en Costa Rica en el periodo estudiado, el hecho de que más electores desarrollen el hábito de votar podría ser un factor decisivo para revertir esa tendencia en el mediano y largo plazo. ¿Por qué algunos ciudadanos votan y

1 Costa Rican Political Scientist. Master of Arts in Quantitative Methods in the social sciences. Columbia University, New York, USA. Master of Arts in Political Science. University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. PhD Candidate in the Political Science Department. University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. Principal researcher of the Americas Barometer in Costa Rica. Researcher in Programa Estado de la Nación. Professor in the Political Science Department. University of Costa Rica.

otros no? ha sido el tema de una impresionante cantidad de atención entre los investigadores y ha dado paso a una enorme cantidad de contribuciones. En contraste con los enfoques teóricos dominantes en la explicación de la participación electoral, algunos expertos han venido señalando que la conducta electoral es mejor comprendida si se analiza la persistencia de una elección a otra, es decir el voto visto desde la perspectiva del hábito. Este artículo aporta un enfoque teórico con el cual se pretende estudiar los efectos del voto habitual y sus implicaciones prácticas.

Palabras clave: voto, participación política, hábitos, persistencia, decisiones de los votantes

Abstract

Under circumstances of substantial turnout reductions, like those in the Costa Rican case in the last decade, the possibility that many more voters cultivate 'habitual voting' may constitute a key factor to revert such tendency in the medium term or in the long run. Why some people vote and others do not, has been the topic of an impressive amount of research attention and an expansive literature. In contrast to the field's two dominant approaches that stress on the individual characteristics that make voters more likely to cast their votes or those that emphasize on the institutional features that influence citizens' voting decisions, other scholars argue that turnout is better explained by persistence from one election to the next, which is habitual voting. In this paper I provide a theoretical framework that explores the effects of habits and their impact on political participation.

Keywords: turnout, political participation, habits, persistence, voters' decisions

INTRODUCTION

"Habits keep us doing what we have always done,

despite our best intentions to act otherwise"[2]

Under circumstances of substantial turnout reductions, like those as in the Costa Rican case in the last decade, the development of electoral habits even matter most because, the possibility that many more voters cultivate 'habitual voting' may constitute a key factor to revert such tendency in the medium term or in the long run. Nevertheless, the counterpart of this argument is less optimistic. As the number of individuals that do not to cast their vote increases, lower turnout would predominate worsening political participation gaps among voters on one hand, and undermining political representation on the other.

The single act of voting overshadows the fact that two complex choices are involved. First, voters must choose between parties or candidates. Also, they must decide whether to show up at the polling station[3]. Why some people vote and others do not, has been the topic of an impressive amount of research attention and an expansive literature[4].

In contrast to the field's two dominant approaches that stress on the individual characteristics that make voters more likely to cast their votes or those that emphasize on the institutional features that influence citizens' voting decisions, other scholars argue that turnout is better explained by persistence from one election to the next, which is habitual voting.

VOTING AS HABIT APPROACH

2 NEAL, David T., WOOD, Wendy and QUINN, Jeffrey M. Habits—a Repeat Performance. Current Directions in Psychological Science August, 2006, 15, no. 4, p. 198-202.

3 WATTENBERG, Martin. Turnout Decline in the U.S. And Other Advanced Industrial Democracies. Irvine, CA: Center for the Study of Democracy, 1998, CAMPBELL, Angus, and CENTER UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN. Survey Research. The American Voter Chicago [Ill.]: University of Chicago Press, 1960..

4 MATSUSAKA, John G., and PALDA, Filip. Voter Turnout: How Much Can We Explain?. Public Choice, 1999, 98, no. 3, p. 431-46; TENN, Steven. The Effect of Education on Voter Turnout. Political Analysis, September, 2007, 15, no. 4, p. 446-64..

According to Plutzer[5] "there exists an ample consensus in the field that voting behavior is, in part, a gradually acquired habit". People learn the habit of voting, or not, based on experience in the first few elections where they were eligible to vote[6].

The logic behind this assumption is that a citizens' voting history is a powerful predictor of future behavior. Brody and Sniderman[7] have reported that past voting behavior predicts current turnout, controlling for individual-level traits and psychological involvement in politics. Although we can find different terminologies in the literature to characterize habitual voting ("consuetude", "habit strength", "inertia", "casual voting", "circumstantial voter"), there is a long standing agreement that voting behavior is habitual[8].

Concretely, casting a ballot in one election increases the voters' propensity to go to the polls in the future. Simply put, "if two individuals have exactly the same characteristics, but one decides to vote and the other does not, then these decisions will affect their probability of voting in future elections"[9]. In other words, "holding pre-existing individual and environmental attributes constant, merely going to the polls increases one's chance of returning"[10].

According to Denny and Doyle[11], observed persistence in voter turnout may be driven by two mechanisms. First, going to the polls may be truly a self-reinforcing act which becomes stronger over time as voters experience more elections. Alternatively, persistence in turnout may be driven by unobserved time invariant individual characteristics (such as parental background), so

---

5 PLUTZER, Eric. "Becoming and Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood." American Political Science Review, 2002, 96, no. 01, p. 41-56.

6 FRANKLIN, M. N., LYONS, P., and MARSH, M. (2004). Generational basis of turnout decline in established democracies. *Acta Politica*, 2004, *39* (2), pp. 115-151.

7 BRODY, Richard A., and SNIDERMAN, Paul M. From Life Space to Polling Place: The Relevance of Personal Concerns for Voting Behavior. British Journal of Political Science, 1977, 7, no. 03, p. 337-360.

8 PLUTZER, Eric. "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood." Óp. cit.

9 DENNY, Kevin, and DOYLE, Orla. Does Voting History Matter? Analysing Persistence in Turnout. American Journal of Political Science, 2009, 53, no. 1, pp. 17-35.

10 GREEN, Donald, and SHACHAR, Ron. Habit Formation and Political Behaviour: Evidence of Consuetude in Voter Turnout. British Journal of Political Science, 2000, 30, no. 04, p. 561-73.

11 DENNY, Kevin, and DOYLE, Orla. Does Voting History Matter? Analysing Persistence in Turnout. Óp. cit.

that the same factors that influenced voting decisions in the previous election are also exerted in the current election. Using an instrumental variables method Green and Shachar[12] provide support for the notion "that voting behavior, in itself, alters subsequent voting proclivities".

Scholars argue that there are three explanations for why voting is habitual[13]. The first hypothesis concerns the ways in which the political environment responds to one's level of political participation. Voters receive much more attention from parties, candidates and issue activists than do non-voters[14].

In addition, a number of experimental studies have found that being contacted prior to an election increases the likelihood of voting[15]. Therefore "becoming a voter induces an individual to remain a voter as they become a crucial part of the political environment"[16].

Using a natural experiment Gerber, Green and Larimer[17] show the extent to which voting rates change as a function of social pressure. The experimental design included four different methods to mail information that simulate ascending levels of social pressure ranging from low to high (sharmness) pressure. They concluded that the more pressure, the more voting, regardless of whether the recipient is predisposed to vote in the first place. Briefly, their study demonstrate that social pressures encourage people to cast ballots. However, other scholars have argued that voters may have negative reactions to social pressure treatments that reduce their effectiveness[18].

Even though we can assume that social pressure has a positive

12 GREEN, Donald, and SHACHAR, Ron. Habit Formation and Political Behaviour: Evidence of Consuetude in Voter Turnout. Óp. cit.

13 IDEM.

14 HUCKFELDT, R. Robert, and SPRAGUE, John D. Political Parties and Electoral Mobilization : Political Structure, Social Structure, and the Party Canvass. *The American political science review,* 1992, 86, no. 1, pp. 525-537.

15 GERBER, Alan S., GREEN, Donald and SHACHAR, Ron. Voting May Be Habit-Forming: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment. American Journal of Political Science, 2003, 47, no. 3, p. 540-50.

16 DENNY, Kevin, and DOYLE, Orla. Does Voting History Matter? Analysing Persistence in Turnout. Óp. cit.

17 GERBER, Alan S., GREEN, Donald P. and LARIMER, C. W. Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment. Am. Polit. Sci. Rev. American Political Science Review, 2008, 102, no. 1, p. 33-48.

18 MANN, Christopher B. Is there backlash to social pressure? A large-scale field experiment on voter mobilization. Political Behavior, 2010, 32, no. 3, p. 387-407.

effect on political participation[19], its effect is limited due to the fact that it can only influence turnout in the short-term. Thus, someone may raises the following question regarding the long-term effects: Does this effect persist over time, in the form of newly created voting habits? There is evidence suggesting that descriptive social norms affect vote intention only among citizens who vote infrequently or occasionally[20]. In other words, when an individual's voting behavior has been habituated, they become clearly exempt of these effects.

A second hypothesis concerns the psychological repercussions of turnout or abstention. Electoral participation may become a habit as individuals derive psychological benefits from casting a vote. Finkel's[21] findings are consistent with this explanation. He notes "that participating in an election increases one's familiarity and confidence with the process, which in turn changes one's sense of political efficacy"[22].

The third set of explanations involves psychological orientations that is, positive or negative feelings about engaging in the act of voting itself. Habitual voting, by this, is a matter of growing comfortable with a given form of action[23].

Plutzer[24] offers a developmental framework for understanding habitual turnout. Highlighted in this framework are the notions of starting level (the probability that citizens vote in their first eligible election) and inertia (the propensity for citizens to settle into habits of voting or nonvoting). This framework distinguishes among factors influencing the starting level, factors that can shift a voter from one inertial state to another, and factors that interrupt established habits.

The developmental model posits "that most young adults start

19 GREEN, Donald P., and GERBER, Alan S. Introduction to social pressure and voting: New experimental evidence. Óp. cit.

20 GERBER, Alan S., and ROGERS, Todd. Descriptive social norms and motivation to vote: Everybody's voting and so should you. The Journal of Politics, 2009, 71, no. 1, 178-191.

21 FINKEL, Steven E. Reciprocal Effects of Participation and Political Efficacy: A Panel Analysis. American Journal of Political Science, 1985, 29, no. 4, p. 891-913.

22 See also DENNY, Kevin, and DOYLE, Orla. Does Voting History Matter? Analyzing Persistence in Turnout. Óp. cit.; NICKERSON, David W. Is Voting Contagious? Evidence from Two Field Experiments. American Political Science Review, 2008, 102, no. 01, p. 49-57.

23 GREEN, Donald, and SHACHAR, Ron. Habit Formation and Political Behavior: Evidence of Consuetude in Voter Turnout. Óp. cit.

24 PLUTZER, Eric. "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood." Óp. cit.

off as habitual non-voters, but over time certain life factors make them become habitual voters". Plutzer employs a latent growth curve analysis to model voting habits over time. He finds that variables which are measured prior to voting age have a greater impact on the starting level i.e. parental socio-economic status, parental involvement, education, and that once voters reach inertia, the influence of these factors diminish[25].

Using a model developed in the econometrics literature Donney and Doyle[26] deal with both unobserved heterogeneity in voting behavior (some fixed, but unobserved characteristics makes voters consistently turn out to vote) and habit formation (past turnout decisions influence subsequent turnout decisions). This study finds that once one controls for socio-economic, demographic and psychological factors, unobserved additional characteristics and initial conditions, an individual who voted in the previous election is more likely to vote in the current election.

AGE-TURNOUT CONNECTION

One complementary explanation to the voting habit approach is what has been typically denominated as the age-turnout connection. In a paper published in 1974 Nie et al. suggest that the widespread evidence found in many studies has led scholars to conclude that there is a great deal of regularity in the relationship between age and political participation[27].

There are three different kinds of explanations within this framework. The first one states that low turnout among the young is a time-based phenomenon that will vanish "as the young grow to adopt several "adult roles" and get more integrated into society"[28].

This framework can readily explain why one of the standard socio-demographic determinants -age- is almost always found to have a positive effect of voter turnout. As habits become rein-

25 Also see DENNY, Kevin, and DOYLE, Orla. Does Voting History Matter? Analyzing Persistence in Turnout. Óp. cit. for a methodological critique.

26 IDEM.

27 NIE, Norman H., VERBA, Sidney and JAE-ON, Kim. Political Participation and the Life Cycle. Comparative Politics, 1974, 6, no. 3, p. 319-40.

28 BHATTI, Y., HANSEN, K. M., and WASS, H. 2012. The relationship between age and turnout: a roller-coaster ride. *Electoral Studies*, forthcoming, 31(3), 588-593.

forcing over time older citizens have had the opportunity to cast their votes in more elections and developing habitual voting.

This perspective is consistent with other turnout habits studies. As Plutzer[29] has said, referring to the social basis of habituation, "voting is likely to bring positive reinforcement from friends, family, and co-workers. As voters age, their peer cohort has increasingly higher participation rates and they eventually move out of age-homogeneous settings (e.g., college residences) and into others (workplaces, community organizations) where the average levels of political knowledge and turnout are higher. Thus, as young citizens take on more adult roles, they are likely to be subject to more and more intense participation norms".

In a similar manner that in the party identification attachment case[30] older individuals are expected to exhibit stronger habitual voting than young voters. This assumption is based on the fact that having previously voted increases one's disposition towards it. This captures the idea that people's sense of voting builds over time.

Older people have had the opportunity to participate in more elections and consequently to develop a habit. Younger citizens have not yet developed a habit of voting whereas the middle aged and elderly have[31]. Similarly, the lifecycle explanation says that as young people become older they get more experienced in the electoral and political process. The reason for this effect is that young people lack the resources that older people have accumulated through life[32].

Also, the generational explanation views low participation as a relatively permanent feature common to the whole generation throughout their life cycle. There is a "generational effect to the degree that those in different birth cohorts bring different life experiences to their political participation"[33]. They all suggest

29 PLUTZER, Eric. "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood." Óp. cit.

30 See SHACHAR, Ron. Party Loyalty as Habit Formation. Journal of Applied Econometrics, 2003, 18, no. 3, p. 251-269.

31 PLUTZER, Eric. "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood." Óp. cit.; GIMPEL, James G., MORRIS, Irwin L. and ARMSTRONG, David R. Turnout and the Local Age Distribution: Examining Political Participation across Space and Time. Political Geography, 2004, 23, no. 1, p. 71-95.

32 QUINTELIER, Ellen. Differences in Political Participation between Young and Old People. Contemporary Politics, 2007, 13, no. 2, p. 165-80.

33 LYONS, William, and ALEXANDER, Robert. A Tale of Two Electorates: Generational Re-

that the transition is easier (more likely) for some cohorts than others. Finally, according to the period effects explanation "declining turnout has been a characteristic feature for the whole era"[34]. Every election is influenced by certain circumstances such as political scandals and important international events that affect all voters, regardless of their age or birth cohort.

These three alternative explanations are seen here as other mechanisms that may confound the effects of habituation and its interaction with age. In sum, the age-turnout connection and habitual voting are not genuinely competing theories, but they differ in emphasis.

However, modeling the causal relationship between consecutive voting decisions is intrinsically difficult[35]. The most common method to study the dynamics of turnout behavior is through Panel studies with several waves. These studies (such as the American National Election Study Panels -ANES- or the British National Child Development Study -NCDS-) offer a wealth of information about respondents' profile and their exposure to different stimuli in sequential elections.

Using surveys or experiments other scholars have examined the static dimension of voting choices. As the majority of the micro-voting literature relies on cross-sectional survey data, which essentially represents a snapshot of the voter's political life, it cannot address the habitual nature of voting behavior. If persistence in turnout is driven solely by individual factors that are constant over time then such analyses are satisfactory. However, if some proportion of persistence is actually habitual, going to the polls in the previous election affects the probability of voting in the current election, then cross-sectional studies are likely to over-estimate the importance of individual socio-demographic and situational factors[36].

In spite of the undeniable theoretical and methodological contributions of both methodological approaches, they suffer from

placement and the Decline of Voting in Presidential Elections. The Journal of Politics, 2000, 62, no. 4 , p. 1014-1034.

34 WASS, Hanna. The Effects of Age, Generation and Period on Turnout in Finland 1975–2003. Electoral Studies, 2007, 26, no. 3, p. 648-59.

35 DENNY, Kevin, and DOYLE, Orla. Does Voting History Matter? Analyzing Persistence in Turnout. Óp. cit.

36 IDEM.

what Hill and Hurley[37] call the "non-voters in voters clothing". This inflated turnout rates factor is one of the dilemmas that disturb all voter turnout analysts: whether to use reported or actual vote. Almost all studies of political behavior rely entirely on self-response measures of turnout".

Due to social desirability issues, individuals tend to inflate voting rates[38] that are certainly very difficult to correct for. In other words there exists measurement error in the dependent variable (turnout). Typically, analysts of voting behavior have been worried about random error and their effects in the covariates. Less attention has been given to the presence of measurement error in the left-hand side of the equation.

People who have a stronger sense of duty, or who have friends in their cohort who vote regularly, or who experienced historical moments that call for civic participation, may be more willing to misrepresent their decision to vote, thus inflating the estimates of age or cohort effects. Also, people who are likely to lie are likely to lie again –because this is an unobserved variable, this will inflate the habituation estimates-.

Plutzer[39] suggest that inertia is a condition that must be understood in order to properly understand the traditional "causes" of turnout. The logic underlying this assumption is that the reasons why voters cast their vote cannot be fully elucidated by rational factors or because voters respond to electoral stimulus (campaign or canvassing effects) but instead because voting becomes habitual through repetition.

Such persistence highlights the dynamic nature of political behavior[40]. Participating in the first elections in which someone is entitled to do so leave a "footprint" in individuals' political behavior. Briefly, previous turnout decisions influence subsequent ones. More concretely voting in one election increases the voters' propensity to go to the polls in the future. Less attention has been given to examine the conditions under which habitual

37 HILL, Kim Quaile, and HURLEY, Patricia A. Nonvoters in Voters' Clothing: The Impact of Voting Behavior Misreporting on Voting Behavior Research. *Social Science Quarterly,* 1984, 65, no. 1, pp. 199-206.

38 IDEM

39 PLUTZER, Eric. "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood." Óp. cit.

40 DENNY, Kevin, and DOYLE, Orla. Does Voting History Matter? Analyzing Persistence in Turnout. Óp. cit.

vote takes place and most importantly, what factors make electoral habits stronger or weaker under specific circumstances.

HABITS AND ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR

A body of literature in political psychology characterizes "habits" in general as a result of repeated processes. Specifically, turnout becomes habitual through repetition and it is guided by an automatic cognitive process rather than by sophisticated decision making. Critics have questioned that frequent behavior does not necessary mean that it is already habituated. An alternative explanation suggest that two conditions must be met for the development of habits: repeated responses and stable features of the context. Therefore, repetition is a necessary but an insufficient condition for developing a strong habit.

In electoral behavior, when habits are established the very activation of the goal to act (electing a President or representatives) automatically evokes the habitual response (voting).

As some scholars have stated succinctly "people are creatures of habit"[41]. The majority of people's actions are executed on a routine basis[42]. Without habits, "people would be guided by plans, consciously guide, and monitor every action"[43]. A well-developed theory in social psychology, with a large amount of empirical evidence, points toward a specific understanding of "habit"[44].

Theories of automaticity developed in social psychology provide a sophisticated theoretical grounding to understand turnout as a habit. Responses given automatically are activated quickly in memory by associated cues, often without intention or deliberation[45].

This theory considers the habit formation as the consequence of a repetitive cognitively-induced process. More plausibly, a be-

41 DANNER, Unna N., AARTS, Henk and DE VRIES Nanne K. Habit Vs. Intention in the Prediction of Future Behaviour: The Role of Frequency, Context Stability and Mental Accessibility of Past Behaviour. British Journal of Social Psychology, 2008, 47, no. 2, p. 245-65.

42 AARTS, Henk, and DIJKSTERHUIS, Ap. Habits as knowledge structures: automaticity in goal-directed behavior. Journal of personality and social psychology, 2000, 78, no. 1, p. 53.

43 NEAL, David T., WOOD, Wendy and QUINN, Jeffrey M. Habits—a Repeat Performance. Óp. cit.

44 WOOD, Wendy and NEAL, David T. A New Look at Habits and the Habit-Goal Interface. Psychological Review, 2007, 114, no. 4, p. 843-863.

45 ALDRICH, John, MONTGOMERY, Jacob and WOOD, Wendy. Turnout as a Habit. Political Behavior, 2011, 33, no. 4, p. 535-63.

havior becomes as automatic as it can get after some number of repetitions, and further repetition no longer increases automaticity. In addition, early repetitions could be expected to result in larger increases as the association between situation and action is created[46]. For Lally et al.[47] "repetition of a behavior in a consistent context progressively activates an automatic response with which the behavior is performed when the situation is encountered".

In the behavioral tradition, habit has always been equated with behavioral frequency[48]. Hull's[49] early work suggested that the relationship between repetition and habit strength follows an asymptotic curve in which automaticity increases steadily—but by a smaller amount with each repetition—until it reaches an asymptote (plateau). In brief, "this theory suggests that habits are sets of automatic scripts executed in response to specific circumstances that are monitored by unconscious emotional subsystems for compatibility with goals"[50].

In fact, Triandis[51] hypothesized that when the same behavior is more frequently executed in the past and increases in habit strength, it is less guided by intention to perform that behavior. In this sense, habits are automatic to the extent that the behavior is no longer predicted (or guided) by intentions. The stronger the habit, the weaker the intention–behavior relationship.

In sum, when behavior is performed repeatedly and becomes habitual, it is guided by automated processes, rather than being

46 DANNER, Unna N., AARTS, Henk and DE VRIES Nanne K. Habit Vs. Intention in the Prediction of Future Behaviour: The Role of Frequency, Context Stability and Mental Accessibility of Past Behaviour. Óp. cit.

47 LALLY, Phillippa, VAN JAARSVELD, Cornelia H. M. POTTS, Henry W. and WARDLE, Jane. How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World. European Journal of Social Psychology, 2010, 40, no. 6, p. 998-1009.

48 HULL, Clark Leonard. Principles of Behavior, an Introduction to Behavior Theory. New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1943.; HULL, Clark Leonard. Essentials of Behavior. New Haven: Published for the Institute of Human Relations by Yale University Press, 1951.; VERPLANKEN, Bas. Beyond Frequency: Habit as Mental Construct. British Journal of Social Psychology, 2006, 45, no. 3, p. 639-56.

49 HULL, Clark Leonard. Principles of Behavior, an Introduction to Behavior Theory. Óp. cit., HULL, Clark Leonard. Essentials of Behavior. Óp. cit.

50 ALDRICH, John, MONTGOMERY, Jacob and WOOD, Wendy. Turnout as a Habit. Political Behavior. Óp. cit.

51 TRIANDIS, Harry. "Values, attitudes, and interpersonal behavior". In E. HOWE, Jr. (Ed.), Nebraska symposium on motivation, Vol. 27, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980, p. 195–259.

preceded by elaborate decision processes[52]. For Aarts, Verplanken, and Van Knippenberg[53] when the same decision has been made over and over again in the past under similar circumstances in order to attain a certain goal, one does not need to assess one's attitudes and behavioral control and to formulate a conscious intention at the time one has to act. Situational cues activate highly accessible mental structures of the behavior that subsequently guide the immediate initiation of the behavior.

That said, the traditional hypothesis states that people who voted at the last election are more likely to vote in the next one.

Others have explored the extent to what habits are driven by goals. More concretely, goals can (a) direct habits by motivating repetition that leads to habit formation and by promoting exposure to cues that trigger habits, (b) be inferred from habits, and (c) interact with habits in ways that preserve the learned habit associations[54]. For Danner et al.[55] people are able to perform goal directed behavior without forming an explicit intention because the behavior is directly mentally accessed in the context at hand as a result of frequently and consistently having performed that behavior in the past.

Another compelling approach considers the role of motivation in individuals' behavior but this one emphasize in the dynamic way. More specifically, motivation would lead to satisfaction (supporting your favorite candidate in a presidential election) or some other form of reward and then the subsequent re-emergence of that same desire will be stronger. The subjective feeling of wanting the same outcome will be stronger and possibly longer lasting as a result of having achieved satisfaction previously. Consequently, not getting leads to less wanting: when a drive repeatedly fails to reach satisfaction, the subsequent desire is likely to be weaker and less frequent[56].

---

52 AARTS, Henk, VERPLANKEN, Bas and VAN KNIPPENBERG, Ad. Predicting Behavior from Actions in the Past: Repeated Decision Making or a Matter of Habit?. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 1998, 28, no. 15, p. 1355-74.

53 IDEM.

54 For more details see WOOD, Wendy and NEAL, David T. A New Look at Habits and the Habit-Goal Interface. Óp. cit.

55 DANNER, Unna N., AARTS, Henk and DE VRIES Nanne K. Habit Vs. Intention in the Prediction of Future Behaviour: The Role of Frequency, Context Stability and Mental Accessibility of Past Behaviour. Óp. cit.

56 VOHS, Kathleen D., and BAUMEISTER, Roy F. Can satisfaction reinforce wanting? A new theory about long-term changes in strength of motivation. New York: Handbook of motivation science, 2008.

According to this approach the logic of individuals' actions is based on the idea that a person desires something, pursues satisfaction, and achieves satisfaction, whereupon the motivation diminishes substantially. At some point, and for possibly unexplained reasons, the motivation re-emerges, and the cycle of seeking and getting starts again. One condition must be met in this approach: satisfactions must be somewhat enjoyable in order to strengthen subsequent desire[57].

More concretely, if one desires something and fails to get it, the result will be an aversive state (e.g., frustration) that could persuade individuals to repeat the act. The long-term result could be a reduction or extinction of the wanting response. In other words, imagine that an individual want to vote for the winning presidential candidate. This individual voted for his favorite candidate but unfortunately he fails to win the contest, his disposition to show up in the next election will decrease.

In contrast to goal pursue and motivational approaches[58], other scholars define habits as cognitive associations between repeated responses and stable features of the context. Habits develop by satisfactorily repeating behavior in stable contexts[59]. Given that the context remains stable and the response is satisfactory, these associations then acquire a degree of automaticity[60]. Habits are formed "when using the same behavior frequently and consistently in a similar context for the same purpose"[61].

Psychological studies based on the theory of habit automaticity, find that contextual features have a causal role in triggering habit performance. In this theory, ''context'' is defined as the set of preceding actions, cues, events, and people that are associated with regular repetition of the action. In particular, habit performance is readily disrupted by changes in performance contexts[62].

---

57 IDEM.

58 The main difference between the desire-behavior link described here and the habitual behaviors is that the latter lacks a wanting component, which provides the basis for reinforcement. A second difference between habits and the getting-wanting model is that habits are associated with higher feelings of control, whereas getting and subsequent wanting, conversely, are characterized by lower feelings of control (Vohs and Baumeister, 2008).

59 WOOD, Wendy, WITT, M. G. and TAM, L. Changing Circumstances, Disrupting Habits. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 2005, 88, no. 6, p. 918-933.

60 VERPLANKEN, Bas. Beyond Frequency: Habit as Mental Construct. Óp. cit.

61 DANNER, Unna N., AARTS, Henk and DE VRIES Nanne K. Habit Vs. Intention in the Prediction of Future Behaviour: The Role of Frequency, Context Stability and Mental Accessibility of Past Behaviour. Óp. cit.

62 WOOD, Wendy, WITT, M. G. and TAM, L. Changing Circumstances, Disrupting Habits.

Accordingly, the key factor for habit behavior is, therefore, a stable stimulus context to occur, and habit has indeed been defined as the tendency to repeat past behavior in a stable context. Alternately, "when behaviors are not well learned or when they are performed in unstable or difficult contexts, conscious decision making is likely to be necessary to initiate and carry out the behavior"[63].

In the field of political behavior numerous contributions have argued that voting is habitual. As scholars have said, in the specific case of turnout, "everyone necessarily starts off with no strength of habit for turnout at all. Turnout, like any other response, becomes automated through behavioral repetition. Repetition is, however, insufficient to develop a strong habit. A habit forms from repetition of a response in the same, or very similar, context"[64]. Consistency basically refers to the stability of the context in which the behavior has been executed in the past.

Thus, the fact that people are sensitive to changes in this context allows us to understand the importance of the context for habits to emerge. Under that circumstances, "the context becomes strongly and exclusively linked to the mental representation of the behavior and hence, the context is capable of eliciting the performance of the behavior directly without conscious intent"[65]. In fact, acknowledging that context plays a role in the establishment of habits Ouellette and Wood[66] have proposed that any measure of habit should reflect the extent to which behavior is performed both frequently and in a stable context.

Óp. cit.; ALDRICH, John, MONTGOMERY, Jacob and WOOD, Wendy. Turnout as a Habit. Political Behavior. Óp. cit.

63 OUELLETTE, J. A., and WOOD, Wendy. Habit and Intention in Everyday Life: The Multiple Processes by Which Past Behavior Predicts Future Behavior. Psychological Bulletin, 1998, 124, no. 1, p. 54-74.

64 ALDRICH, John, MONTGOMERY, Jacob and WOOD, Wendy. Turnout as a Habit. Political Behavior. Óp. cit.

65 DANNER, Unna N., AARTS, Henk and DE VRIES Nanne K. Habit Vs. Intention in the Prediction of Future Behaviour: The Role of Frequency, Context Stability and Mental Accessibility of Past Behaviour. Óp. cit.

66 OUELLETTE, J. A., and WOOD, Wendy. Habit and Intention in Everyday Life: The Multiple Processes by Which Past Behavior Predicts Future Behavior. Óp. cit.; WOOD, Wendy, WITT, M. G. and TAM, L. Changing Circumstances, Disrupting Habits. Óp. cit.

WHEN DO TURNOUT HABITS BREAK DOWN?

The main difference between turnout and other many behaviors is, however, that "the context is not fixed, and so we must consider not only the repetition of that behavior but also whether those repetitions are made in similar contexts"[67].

For others scholars "when usual contexts for performance change, habits cannot be cued by recurring stimuli, and performance should be disrupted. Habits survive only when aspects of the performance context did not change. This means that habits emerge when performed in particular locations, at specific times, in particular moods, and with or without certain interaction partners". Briefly, habits are context dependent[68].

This assumption implies that the alteration of the context, via different sources, is going to interrupt the habit cycle. In other words, structural changes in individuals' life cycle might have the capacity to disrupt the context in which turnout habit occur. However, only some changes in circumstances should yield change in habitual behavior[69].

Scholars have attributed to residential mobility deleterious effects regarding political participation. According to Highton and Wolfinger[70] "there is no question that people of any age who change residence are less likely to vote". Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass[71] find "that turnout in the United States would increase by nine percentage points if the effect of moving were removed".

Scholars claim that the consequent need to re-register rather than any disruption of social ties[72]. Others argue, in contrast, that "residential mobility is associated with lower turnout due to the fact that such people may have less attachment to their new community"[73]. In sum, the literature suggests that residential

---

67 ALDRICH, John, MONTGOMERY, Jacob and WOOD, Wendy. Turnout as a Habit. Political Behavior. Óp. cit.

68 WOOD, Wendy, WITT, M. G. and TAM, L. Changing Circumstances, Disrupting Habits. Óp. cit.

69 IDEM.

70 HIGHTON, Benjamin, and WOLFINGER, Raymond E. The First Seven Years of the Political Life Cycle. American Journal of Political Science, 2001, 45, no. 1, p. 202-09.

71 SQUIRE, Peverill, WOLFINGER, Raymond E. and GLASS, David P. Residential Mobility and Voter Turnout. *The American political science review*, 1987, 81, no. 1 pp. 45-66.

72 HIGHTON, Benjamin. Residential Mobility, Community Mobility, and Electoral Participation. *Political Behavior*, 2000, 22, no. 2, pp. 109-120.

73 DENNY, Kevin, and DOYLE, Orla. Does Voting History Matter? Analysing Persistence in

stability facilitates turnout habits.

The traditional view in the political behavior field has ignored the possibility the extent to what residential mobility indirectly affect turnout. Aldrich et al.[74] argue with respect to voting, that the performance context is particularly deeply disrupted when people move to a new location. "As with all context disruptions, the features of context that cued habitual voting in the old location are broken and need to be reestablished in the new location before a strong habit for turnout can be reestablished. Put another way, those who have just moved cannot be turning out due to a habitual response. Those who have not moved might be turning out due to recurring cues that activated the habitual response".

For Plutzer[75] residential mobility may temporarily disrupt habitual voters' regular pattern. Like other disruptive factors, "residential mobility is primarily a factor affecting habitual voters".

In summary, there is ample evidence indicating that habitual behavior is automatic. It is determined by past behavior and not mediated by attitudes, intentions, or other concepts referring to more deliberate or conscious processes. Therefore, elucidating the conditions that facilitate or inhibit the habit of voting became a useful way to understand why some individuals vote and others do not.

In contrast to the traditional theoretical approaches that, on one hand, highlight the individual characteristics that make voters more likely to cast their votes or those that, on the other, stresses the institutional features that influence citizens' voting decisions, habitual voting theory emphasize in the persistence dimension of turnout from one election to the next.

Finally, if we want to understand the implications of turnout decline in democratic regimes, we first need to comprehend the conditions under which habitual voting takes place. In this paper I provide a theoretical framework that explores the effects of habits and their impact on political participation.

Turnout. Óp. cit.

74 ALDRICH, John, MONTGOMERY, Jacob and WOOD, Wendy. Turnout as a Habit. Political Behavior. Óp. cit.

75 PLUTZER, Eric. "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood." Óp. cit.

REFERENCES

AARTS, Henk, VERPLANKEN, Bas and VAN KNIPPENBERG, Ad. Predicting Behavior from Actions in the Past: Repeated Decision Making or a Matter of Habit?. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology,* 1998, 28, no. 15, p. 1355-74.

AARTS, Henk, and DIJKSTERHUIS, Ap. Habits as knowledge structures: automaticity in goal-directed behavior. Journal of personality and social psychology, 2000, 78, no. 1, p. 53.

ALDRICH, John, MONTGOMERY, Jacob and WOOD, Wendy. Turnout as a Habit. *Political Behavior,* 2011, 33, no. 4, p. 535-63.

BHATTI, Y., HANSEN, K. M., and WASS, H. 2012. The relationship between age and turnout: a roller-coaster ride. *Electoral Studies*, forthcoming, 31(3), 588-593.

BRODY, Richard A., and SNIDERMAN, Paul M.. From Life Space to Polling Place: The Relevance of Personal Concerns for Voting Behavior. *British Journal of Political Science,* 1977, 7, no. 03, pp. 337-360.

CAMPBELL, Angus, and CENTER UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN. Survey Research. *The American Voter* Chicago [Ill.]: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

DANNER, Unna N., AARTS, Henk and DE VRIES Nanne K. Habit Vs. Intention in the Prediction of Future Behaviour: The Role of Frequency, Context Stability and Mental Accessibility of Past Behaviour. *British Journal of Social Psychology,* 2008, 47, no. 2, p. 245-65.

DENNY, Kevin, and DOYLE, Orla. Does Voting History Matter? Analysing Persistence in Turnout. *American Journal of Political Science,* 2009, 53, no. 1, p. 17-35.

FINKEL, Steven E. Reciprocal Effects of Participation and Political Efficacy: A Panel Analysis. *American Journal of Political Science* 29, no. 4 (1985): 891-913.

FRANKLIN, M. N., LYONS, P., and MARSH, M. (2004). Generational basis of turnout decline in established democracies. Acta Politica, 2004, 39 (2), pp. 115-151.

GERBER, Alan S., GREEN, Donald P. and LARIMER, C. W. Social

Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment. *Am. Polit. Sci. Rev. American Political Science Review,* 2008, 102, no. 1, p. 33-48.

GERBER, Alan S., GREEN, Donald and SHACHAR, Ron. Voting May Be Habit-Forming: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment. *American Journal of Political Science,* 2003, 47, no. 3, p. 540-50.

GERBER, Alan S., and ROGERS, Todd. Descriptive social norms and motivation to vote: Everybody's voting and so should you. *The Journal of Politics*, 2009, 71, no. 1, 178-191.

GREEN, Donald P., and GERBER, Alan S. Introduction to social pressure and voting: New experimental evidence. *Political Behavior,* 2010, 32, no. 3, p. 331-336.

GREEN, Donald, and SHACHAR, Ron. Habit Formation and Political Behaviour: Evidence of Consuetude in Voter Turnout. *British Journal of Political Science,* 2000, 30, no. 04, p. 561-73.

GIMPEL, James G., MORRIS, Irwin L. and ARMSTRONG, David R. Turnout and the Local Age Distribution: Examining Political Participation across Space and Time. *Political Geography,* 2004, 23, no. 1, p. 71-95.

HIGHTON, Benjamin, and WOLFINGER, Raymond E. The First Seven Years of the Political Life Cycle. *American Journal of Political Science,* 2001, 45, no. 1, p. 202-09.

HIGHTON, Benjamin. Residential Mobility, Community Mobility, and Electoral Participation. *Political Behavior*, 2000, 22, no. 2, pp. 109-120.

HILL, Kim Quaile, and HURLEY, Patricia A. Nonvoters in Voters' Clothing: The Impact of Voting Behavior Misreporting on Voting Behavior Research. *Social Science Quarterly*, 1984, 65, no. 1, pp. 199-206.

HUCKFELDT, R. Robert, and SPRAGUE, John D. Political Parties and Electoral Mobilization : Political Structure, Social Structure, and the Party Canvass. *The American political science review*, 1992, 86, no. 1, pp. 525-537.

HULL, Clark Leonard. *Essentials of Behavior.* New Haven: Published for the Institute of Human Relations by Yale University

Press, 1951.

HULL, Clark Leonard. *Principles of Behavior, an Introduction to Behavior Theory*. New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1943.

LALLY, Phillippa, VAN JAARSVELD, Cornelia H. M. POTTS, Henry W. and WARDLE, Jane. How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World. *European Journal of Social Psychology,* 2010, 40, no. 6, p. 998-1009.

LYONS, William, and ALEXANDER, Robert. A Tale of Two Electorates: Generational Replacement and the Decline of Voting in Presidential Elections. *The Journal of Politics,* 2000, 62, no. 4 , p. 1014-1034.

MANN, Christopher B. Is there backlash to social pressure? A large-scale field experiment on voter mobilization. Political Behavior, 2010, 32, no. 3, p. 387-407.

MATSUSAKA, John G., and PALDA, Filip. Voter Turnout: How Much Can We Explain?. *Public Choice,* 1999, 98, no. 3, p. 431-46.

NEAL, David T., WOOD, Wendy and QUINN, Jeffrey M. Habits—a Repeat Performance. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* August, 2006, 15, no. 4, p. 198-202.

NICKERSON, David W. Is Voting Contagious? Evidence from Two Field Experiments. *American Political Science Review,* 2008, 102, no. 01, p. 49-57.

NIE, Norman H., VERBA, Sidney and JAE-ON, Kim. Political Participation and the Life Cycle. *Comparative Politics,* 1974, 6, no. 3, p. 319-40.

OUELLETTE, J. A., and WOOD, Wendy. Habit and Intention in Everyday Life: The Multiple Processes by Which Past Behavior Predicts Future Behavior. *Psychological Bulletin,* 1998, 124, no. 1, p. 54-74.

PLUTZER, Eric. "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood." *American Political Science Review,* 2002, 96, no. 01, p. 41-56.

QUINTELIER, Ellen. Differences in Political Participation between Young and Old People. *Contemporary Politics,* 2007, 13, no. 2, p. 165-80.

SHACHAR, Ron. Party Loyalty as Habit Formation. *Journal of Applied Econometrics,* 2003, 18, no. 3, p. 251-269.

SQUIRE, Peverill, WOLFINGER, Raymond E. and GLASS, David P. Residential Mobility and Voter Turnout. The American political science review, 1987, 81, no. 1 pp. 45-66.

TRIANDIS, Harry. "Values, attitudes, and interpersonal behavior". In E. HOWE, Jr. (Ed.), Nebraska symposium on motivation, Vol. 27, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980, p. 195–259.

TENN, Steven. The Effect of Education on Voter Turnout. *Political Analysis,* September, 2007, 15, no. 4, p. 446-64.

VERPLANKEN, Bas. Beyond Frequency: Habit as Mental Construct. *British Journal of Social Psychology,* 2006, 45, no. 3, p. 639-56.

VOHS, Kathleen D., and BAUMEISTER, Roy F. *Can satisfaction reinforce wanting? A new theory about long-term changes in strength of motivation*. New York: Handbook of motivation science, 2008.

WASS, Hanna. The Effects of Age, Generation and Period on Turnout in Finland 1975–2003. *Electoral Studies,* 2007, 26, no. 3, p. 648-59.

WATTENBERG, Martin. Turnout Decline in the U.S. And Other Advanced Industrial Democracies. Irvine, CA: Center for the Study of Democracy, 1998.

WOLFINGER, Raymond E., and ROSENSTONE, Steven J. *Who Votes?* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

WOOD, Wendy, WITT, M. G. and TAM, L. "Changing Circumstances, Disrupting Habits." *Journal of personality and social psychology,* 2005, 88, no. 6, p. 918-933.

WOOD, Wendy and NEAL, David T. A New Look at Habits and the Habit-Goal Interface. *Psychological Review,* 2007, 114, no. 4, p. 843-863.

ZUCKERMAN, Alan S., KOTLER-BERKOWITZ, Laurence A. and SWAINE, Lucas A. Anchoring Political Preferences: The Structural Bases of Stable Electoral Decisions and Political Attitudes in Britain. *European Journal of Political Research,* 1998, 33, no. 3, p. 285.