

Study shows voter turnout can be increased with simple word change

July 19 2011, by Bob Yirka

(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study by social psychologist Christopher Bryan and his colleagues at Stanford University shows just how easily people can be manipulated using their own vanity; by doing nothing more than changing the word "vote," to "voter," on a survey, Bryan et al, have demonstrated that it's possible to increase voter turnout in real-world elections. The team has published their results in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

To see if his hunch, that people would respond better to the opportunity to be called a [voter](#), rather than simply asking them to [vote](#), could improve [voter turnout](#), Bryan and his team first sent out surveys to just 38 people prior to the 2008 [presidential election](#). Half the group got a survey asking if it was important to *vote*, the other half got surveys asking if it was important to be a *voter*. 87.5 responded yes to the second question while only 55.6 did so with the first.

Feeling he was on to something, Bryan then set his sights higher, for his next experiment, he and his team sent surveys to 133 registered voters in California one day before the 2008 election. Afterwards, using [voting records](#), he was able to ascertain that 82% of those who got the "vote" question actually voted, while 96% of the "voter" group did.

Then to make sure his results weren't tainted by the fact that the recipients of the surveys were all quite young, and Californian, the team sent out surveys to 214 older registered voters from New Jersey just before their gubernatorial election, and found similar results; 90% for

the “voter” group versus 79% for the “vote” group. Bryan says this is the largest ever measured effect on voter turnout.

Bryan suspects that the increase is due to how people view themselves, or maybe just how they want to; by wording a survey that allows a person to see themselves as a voter, vanity is struck because most people view being considered a voter, a positive thing; just asking people to vote on the other hand, sounds more like you’re asking them to do something, which in voter surveys doesn’t seem to stoke much of anything, except perhaps excuses in some people. That the survey was able to translate words into action appears to be due to the opportunity it affords the recipients to be being considered something so positive as a voter, a distinction they perhaps hadn’t quite fully considered prior to receiving the simple survey.

To see if the same sort of results can be had in other areas, Bryan and his team will next be looking at whether such word phrasing changes can be effective in helping people diet, or to work to save the environment, etc.

More information: Motivating voter turnout by invoking the self, *PNAS*, Published online before print July 18, 2011, [doi:10.1073/pnas.1103343108](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1103343108)

Abstract

Three randomized experiments found that subtle linguistic cues have the power to increase voting and related behavior. The phrasing of survey items was varied to frame voting either as the enactment of a personal identity (e.g., “being a voter”) or as simply a behavior (e.g., “voting”). As predicted, the personal-identity phrasing significantly increased interest in registering to vote (experiment 1) and, in two statewide elections in the United States, voter turnout as assessed by official state records (experiments 2 and 3). These results provide evidence that people are continually managing their self-concepts, seeking to assume or affirm

valued personal identities. The results further demonstrate how this process can be channeled to motivate important socially relevant behavior.

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Citation: Study shows voter turnout can be increased with simple word change (2011, July 19)
retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-07-voter-turnout-simple-word.html>

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