

Votes are influenced by friends, neighbors and groups, study says

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(Phys.org) -- Neighbors' lawn signs, public opinion polls and even a conversation in the next restaurant booth can affect how people vote in an election, suggests a new University of California, Davis, study. But it all depends on how far away the election is.

“Research like this highlights the fact that we are social creatures,” said Alison Ledgerwood, assistant professor of psychology at UC Davis and author of the study. “We clearly use other people to help us make our decisions, but what this research shows is that we rely on different people’s opinions for near-future and distant-future events.”

Ledgerwood’s study — using both New York University and UC Davis student subjects in simulated votes and opinion surveys — found that when it comes to decisions about the distant future, peer group opinions carry a lot of weight.

“When thinking about an election that will occur next year, rather than tomorrow, or when voting by absentee ballot rather than in person at the voting booth, individuals may be especially likely to adopt whatever opinions seem to be endorsed by a majority of their group members,” Ledgerwood said.

But as an election nears, the views of individuals become more influential.

“Tuning into what the person sitting next to you happens to think about

an issue is a great strategy for getting along in the current context,” she said.

The research suggests that people making calls to voters months ahead of time trying to influence a [vote](#) might embrace specific tactics: “You might want to mention polling results. You might want to say: Most people in your political party think this is a good candidate or a good issue,” Ledgerwood said.

However, polls announced the day or week before probably have little effect. “As we get closer to voting day, polls affect us less and less,” she said. “Meanwhile, what one other person happens to think might affect us more and more. The point is, we are always influenced by what other people think, but who influences us most is going to depend on timing.”

Ledgerwood’s article, “The Social Side of Abstraction: Psychological Distance Enhances Conformity to Group Norms” was co-authored by UC Davis graduate student Shannon Callahan and appears in the latest issue of *Psychological Science*.

More information: The article is available by clicking on “request” in the top right corner at: psychology.ucdavis.edu/Labs/Le.../index.cfm?Section=3

Provided by UC Davis

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