Voting as a Right or a Duty:

A social Psychological Analysis

Meredith Sprengel

Georgetown University
Introduction:

The United States electoral system is facing a puzzling challenge: of the 22 countries that are considered “industrialized” (Wattenburge, 1998, p.6), the United States has the lowest voter participation. Fifteen of the 21 industrialized democracies have a voter participation of 75% or higher (http://www.idea.int/vt/survey/voter_turnout_pop2-2.cfm). Not since the McKinley-Bryan presidential election in 1896 has the percentage of citizens who have voted in a national or state election been over 80% (Mayhew, 2005). Less than 100 years later, only half of eligible voters voted in the presidential election of 1988 (p.638) and in the 1990 election 33.1% of voters turned out: the lowest voter turn-out in United States history (Wattenburge, 1998, p.4).

Since the McKinley-Bryan presidential election in 1896, there have been a few events which people have cited (Kramer, 1971) as key moments that have defined who votes and who doesn't in the American electoral process. After the McKinley-Bryan election, the greatest surge of non-western European immigrants came to the United States. These immigrants coming from Southern Europe and China (who were eligible to vote) either did not understand the political system or did not feel connected to the electoral process. The second event that was cited up until the late 1970's as a reason why the United States had such low voter participation was the enfranchisement of women in 1920 under the Woodrow Wilson administration. However, in 1964 the percent of women who voted surpassed that of men and now on average 7.7% more women than men vote in national elections (Corder & Wolbrecht, 2003). Chicago's mayoral election in 1926 is the next event cited by political scientists (Wooddy, 1974). This was the first time that strict voting laws were introduced and in turn
participation in the election decreased.

The next monumental shift in voter demographics occurred after WWII when hundreds of thousands of soldiers and immigrants entered the US, politicians in turn found it hard to decipher how to appeal to the American public since it had become such a diverse terrain of WWII veterans and immigrants from war-torn European countries. Lastly, on July 1, 1971 the 26th amendment was passed lowering the age that a citizen was allowed to vote from 20 to 18. Among all eligible voters, the 18-25 age group has the lowest voter participation. So, in turn many believe that that decrease in the number of individuals participating in the electoral process is solely a reflection of the enfranchisement 18-20 year olds. However, when the numbers are examined, the effect that the 26th amendment had on voter participation is not statistically significant.

So, what has caused a decreased in the percentage of United States citizens who vote in national elections? What makes the United States political climate different from that found in other industrialized democracies? Although understanding defining moments in the history of voting behavior in the United States since the McKinley-Bryan election is important, it still does not provide a scientific framework in which to understand voting apathy. Rather, it merely allows us to decipher how voting behavior has been changed during the last 112 years. From here we can begin our investigation of the apathetic approach to the American electoral system that more than half the United States citizens have expressed toward regarding the act of voting.

Voting Behavior has been a topic investigated by political scientists, statisticians, and sociologists alike. However, as became clear through literature searches, the field of psychology has done little to contribute to the literature on and the understanding of United States voter apathy. Since 1945, voter participation in national congressional and presidential elections on average has been 48%.
Other than Sweden (whose voter participation on average since 1945 is 49.9%) the lowest voter participation in all the other industrialized democracies is 67.3% in France.

Even though the phenomenon of United States apathy has been a subject of inquiry for many disciplines, little is still known as to why the American populace is not invested in the electoral process. In the 21 industrial democracies whether or not voting is a right or a duty is constitutionally legislated. Nevertheless, this does not mean that those countries that have legislated voting as a duty automatically have higher voting percentages. In Belgium, Switzerland, and Australia, voting is legislated as a duty (meaning that voting is compulsory and that citizens have to participate in the electoral process) in the strictest sense: if you do not participate in the electoral process that you will be fined to pay a certain amount of money to the government (http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm). In some states voting is defined as a duty but voter participation is not enforced. This is the cares for Italy, parts of Austria (in the regions of Tyrol and Vorarlberg), France, and the Netherlands (http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm). In the other 13 industrial democracies voting is legislated constitutionally as a right; meaning that it is up to the citizen whether or not he or she participates in the electoral process.

Although it is necessary to understand the distinction made by countries in their constitutions regarding whether or not voting is defined as a right or a duty, here we are more concerned with the social-psychological and inter-group relations distinction of how individuals and groups perceive and define their rights and duties as it relates to the electoral process. The relationship between a government and its citizens can be better understood by deciphering the way citizens perceive their rights and duties in relation to their governmental body. The distinction between rights and duties is clearly defined by United States governmental procedures and the electoral process. However, the
The distinction between the sociological-psychological assertions regarding who has the right and who has the duty to vote is an assertion distinguished independently of how voting is legislated in the constitution. A current analysis which is used to understand and interpret inter-group relations is to dissect the distribution of rights and duties within a culture, civil society, and political society.

The distinction between a right and a duty in a social-psychological context is as follows: “A right is a demand placed on others by the person who possesses it, while a duty is a demand placed by others on the person who owes it” (Moghaddam, Finkle, Harre, Mor & Slocum, 2000, p. 275).

Participation is or isn’t incumbent upon citizens in relation to the group that they participate in and use to define who they are or are not by participating in the electoral system. Understanding how citizens perceive the act of voting, either as a right or a duty, can shed new light on why the average United States citizen so often approaches the electoral process with apathy.

This analysis using how citizens define their rights and duties addresses: How does each group in society view their rights and duties are to society and what are the rights and duties of the group that you are associated with socially? It appears that citizens will view something as a right if they are afraid of that something being taken away from them or if they are trying to gain a privilege within society. However, a group that feels as if it is their duty to engage in certain activities usually holds some type of power within society. This is because the majority group has the power and therefore can define what is a duty or a right for themselves and others. It is also in the interest of the majority group with the power to maintain the status quo and thereby keep their majority group status. If the relationship between the minority and majority is stable then the minority group will tend to follow the demands and structures which the majority group has perpetuated.

The current literature dealing with rights and duties has included a range of topics. The
framework established by the relationship between minority and majority groups in relation to their rights and duties is the approach that will be taken in this experiment as a means to investigate the psychological machinations behind the apathetic approach of US citizens to their electoral system. By assessing how the majority and minority groups approach the act of voting it will be possible to see how the distribution of rights and duties are indicative of the social structure which in turn affects the way in which individuals vote and why they perceive this participation as is either their right or duty to vote. Additionally, this framework also incorporated whether or not a citizens perception of their and others rights or duties to the electoral system would be affected by whether they did or did not have the ability to affect change through the act of participating in the electoral process.

In the first experiment participants were told that they were going to be tested on their decision making skills and were given a measure that was perceived as a legitimate means to test their decision making skills. After they received their results they rated the level in which they agreed or disagreed with statements concerning their and other groups rights and duties to the electoral process. The second experiment used an experiment analogous to Tajfel's minimal group paradigm in an attempt to discern whether placing participants into certain categories and/or groups on a trivial basis could change their perceptions of voting. Using rights and duties to analyze this condition in conjunction with manipulating group membership will enable us to better understand the apathetic approach to the United States electoral system.

Procedure for Experiment I

Participants: In the first experiment 72 Georgetown undergraduate students participated. None of the participants were aware of purpose of the study before its completion. All participants were told not to communicate with other participants at any time during the experiment.
Procedure:

The participants were first informed that they would take part in a social psychological experiment that was meant to test their decision making skills. Participants were told that a recent study found that United States citizens who had sophisticated decision making skills were more successful not only in accomplishing their goals, but they were more affluent, able to climb the social and economic latter very quickly, and that they had the ability to make better decisions regarding politics and the United States electoral system. They were also informed that people who were given the distinction of being an unsophisticated decision maker were significantly less economically, socially, and politically successful.ii

After the participants were informed of this study, they were told they would participate in this very same study to see if the results could be replicated. Participants were then played a tape which repeated what they had already been told regarding sophisticated and unsophisticated decision makers and were informed of the experimental procedures. First the participants would be handed a political scenario in which a senior campaign official’s job was on the line and they would have to write a paragraph about why the campaign adviser should or should not be fired from the campaign. The scenario that participants received was as follows:

Sam D is a politician facing a very difficult election. In the midst of an ongoing political campaign, Sam D's chief adviser has been accused of having corrupt business connections. Even through Sam's chief adviser has never been legally accused of having any involvement in illegal transactions, the strong rumors are hurting Sam’s political campaign. Sam’s other advisers can’t decide whether or not the chief adviser should be fired. A poll was taken and half of them believe he should be let go because of the highly negative attention the campaign is receiving and the other half feel that he is irreplaceable because he has brought Sam a lot of political support and campaign contributions. In your opinion, what should Sam do and why?
I believe that Sam Should: Keep the adviser _______ Fire the adviser _________
After they had assessed the political situation, participants were told that their answers would be assessed by a panel of three judges whose decision making skills were deemed sophisticated and in turn they were part of the sophisticated group. Nevertheless, this was not in actuality the case: the informants were placed in groups arbitrarily and not according to how they assessed the political scenario.

To make the participants more aware of the benefits that being a member of the sophisticated group provided as well as to the make the informants more invested in the task, they were told that participants who were placed in the sophisticated group would be placed in a lottery for 300$. In turn, those who were placed in the unsophisticated group would be placed in a lottery for a dollar. In reality, all subjects were placed in the 300$ lottery.

After participants had heard the tape and were made aware of the purpose of the experiment they were handed two pieces of paper. The first piece of paper had their identification number on it and subsequently participants would write this number on all the other sheets of paper which they would receive during the experiment. The second piece of paper contained the political scenario and room for participants to write their answer at the bottom. They were given five minutes in which they were instructed to decide how they would deal with the situation at hand. After the five minutes were over, the sheets containing the political scenario and the participant’s responses were collected. Participants were again instructed not to discuss their responses with any of the other participants.

While the participants were completing a filler task, they were arbitrarily placed in one of three groups: sophisticated decision makers, unsophisticated decision makers with a 1% chance of affecting change, and unsophisticated decision makers with an 80% chance of affecting change. However, the participants were not aware that there would be two different groups of decision makers with one group
having a 1% chance of affecting change and the other with an 80% chance of affecting change. The participants received their evaluations of whether or not they were a part of the sophisticated or unsophisticated decision making group after participating in a filler task for forty minutes. This was to create the allusion that their decision making abilities were in actuality being assessed.

After the participants had completed the filler task, their assessments were passed out. Participants were placed in one of the following groups:

SOPHISTICATED
Based on your performance on the decision-making task, the members of the sophisticated group voted to accept you as part of their group. Congratulations, this indicates you will be very successful in the future. However, the procedures being followed to decide group membership have been challenged. The challengers insist that a vote be taken on how group membership will be decided. You are eligible to vote but, to be frank; there is only a 1% chance that your vote will make a difference.

UNSOPHISTICATED
Based on your performance on the decision-making task, the members of the sophisticated group voted not to accept you as part of their group. Unfortunately, this indicates you will not be successful in the future. However, the procedures being followed to decide group membership have been challenged. The challengers insist that a vote be taken on how group membership will be decided. You are eligible to vote but, to be frank, there is only a 1% chance that your vote will make a difference.

UNSOPHISTICATED
Based on your performance on the decision-making task, the members of the sophisticated group voted not to accept you as part of their group. Unfortunately, this indicates you will not be successful in the future. However, the procedures being followed to decide group membership have been challenged. The challengers insist that a vote be taken on how group membership will be decided. You are eligible to vote, and there is an 80% chance that your vote will make a difference.

The participants received one of these responses in a paper that was folded over with their number on the front. The number of informants who were placed in each of the groups was 31 in the unsophisticated decision making with a 1% chance of affecting change, 22 in the unsophisticated decision making group with an 80% chance of affecting change, and 20 in the sophisticated decision making group.

After participants were placed in one of the three decision making groups, they were told that
many people have contested the findings of this experiment. Because of the protests, the participants would have an opportunity to express their views by filling out a questionnaire (using a Likert scale: 1[strongly disagree]-18 [strongly agree]). The participants were told that this questionnaire would be used to assess their experience and thoughts on being placed into a particular decision making group. Participants were then given the survey which contained seven different questions emphasizing rights and duties in relation to the United States electoral system. The questions in which participants were asked to assess using a Likert scale (1[strongly disagree]-18 [strongly agree]) are:

1- Voting in this Election should be a right so that participants who do not want to vote do not have to.

2- Is it the right of only those participants who are better informed to vote in this election.

3- Individuals who do not keep up with political events, are not knowledgeable, and are members of the unsophisticated decision making group should still have the right to vote in this election.

4- Voting in this election should be a duty so that all participants should be obligated to vote.

5- It is the duty of only those participants who are better informed to vote in this election.

6- Individuals who do not keep up with political events, are not knowledgeable, and are members of the sophisticated decision making group should still have the right to vote.

7- It does not bother me if few people vote as long as those people who are in my group participate in this election.

After all participants had completed the survey they were instructed to hand in all the papers which they had received during the experiment. Participants were then debriefed about the real purpose of the study.

Procedure for Experiment II

Participants: In the second experiment 75 Georgetown undergraduate students participated. All participants were told not to communicate with other participants at any time during the experiment.

Procedure and Instructions:
There were two major changes made to the procedure and the instructions in the second experiment. For one, in the second experiment the minimal group paradigm model (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) was used and participants were verbally told the instructions and the purpose of the study.

The minimal group paradigm is used to understand and decipher the phenomenon of intergroup behavior when individuals are placed into groups arbitrarily. The minimal group paradigm was instituted in the second experiment to see whether or not arbitrary group membership would yield the same or different results regarding how participants viewed rights and duties than in the first experiment. Subsequently, in the second experiment the test used to decide group membership was changed. This time participants were given the trivial task of deciding which of two knocks was louder. Individuals were again placed in either the unsophisticated 1%, unsophisticated 80%, or the sophisticated decision making group. Other than the adjustments mentioned above the experiment was carried out in the same manner.

Results:

Table I: Manipulation One Using a Task Oriented Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Unsophisticated 1% (n=30)</th>
<th>Unsophisticated 80% (n=22)</th>
<th>Sophisticated (n=19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 1</td>
<td>13.84 (SD= 5.05)</td>
<td>13 (SD= 5.89)</td>
<td>14.95 (SD= 2.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>5.97 (SD= 5.47)</td>
<td>6.23 (SD= 5.26)</td>
<td>7.5 (5.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3</td>
<td>13.07 (SD= 5.14)</td>
<td>14.1 (SD= 4.7)</td>
<td>13.25 (SD= 4.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4</td>
<td>6.25 (SD= 5.14)</td>
<td>6.14 (SD= 5.3)</td>
<td>5.45 (SD= 4.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5</td>
<td>5.77 (SD= 5.06)</td>
<td>6.73 (SD= 5.91)</td>
<td>8.2 (SD= 6.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 6</td>
<td>14.55 (SD= 4.1)</td>
<td>14.32 (SD= 5.13)</td>
<td>13.95 (SD= 3.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 7</td>
<td>6.29 (SD= 4.93)</td>
<td>5.77 (SD= 4.9)</td>
<td>7 (SD= 4.81)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above table represents data compiled in a survey designed to see if group membership affected the way participants perceived their rights and duties. Analysis of means using a one-way ANOVA between subjects was utilized. Group membership was used as the independent variable and the subject’s ratings as the dependent variables. Seven ANOVA’s were performed; but no significant differences were found.

Table II: Manipulation in the study of the Minimal Group Paradigm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Unsophisticated 1% (n=27)</th>
<th>Unsophisticated 80% (n=23)</th>
<th>Sophisticated (n=24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 1</td>
<td>14.3 (SD= 5.54)</td>
<td>14.09 (SD= 4.68)</td>
<td>14.17 (SD= 4.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>7.32 (SD= 5.36)</td>
<td>7.65 (SD= 5.72)</td>
<td>8.68 (SD= 5.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3</td>
<td>15.9 (SD= 2.52)</td>
<td>13.44 (SD= 5.43)</td>
<td>12.88 (SD= 5.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4</td>
<td>7.2 (SD= 5.63)</td>
<td>6.61 (SD= 5.18)</td>
<td>8.16 (SD= 5.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5</td>
<td>7.7 (SD= 6.06)</td>
<td>8.3 (SD= 5.59)</td>
<td>8.56 (SD= 4.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 6</td>
<td>14.04 (SD= 4.23)</td>
<td>12.78 (SD= 5.7)</td>
<td>13.16 (SD= 4.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 7</td>
<td>6.7 (SD= 4.09)</td>
<td>8.83 (SD= 5.07)</td>
<td>8.32 (SD= 5.48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seven ANOVA’s were computed to test for a difference between the way that members of the different groups [unsophisticated 1%, unsophisticated 80%, and sophisticated group] responded to the seven questions featured in the experiment. This time, the independent variable was group identification and the responses to the seven survey questions were the dependent variable. The only significant result was between the way that members of the unsophisticated group (with a 1% chance of affecting change) and the sophisticated group responded to the survey (P<.05).

T-tests were performed to discern whether or not participants answered the seven questions in the two experiments differently. Here only two responses (within all three groups for the seven questions) were significantly different in the second experiment in comparison with the first: the
unsophisticated group in question three (P < .011) and the sophisticated group in question four (P < .024).

Discussion:

The purpose of this experiment was to examine whether or not the basis for group membership (be it trivial or a perceived important measure) and the perceived ability to change the system would affect citizens perception of whether or not it was their, and subsequently other citizens, right or duty to participate in the electoral process. To do this, two experiments were conducted: one which evaluated participants based on a perceived important and accurate criteria and another experiment in which participants were evaluated using a trivial criteria. In both experiments participants were placed into one of three groups based on their performance on the tasks in the experiments.

In the first experiment, participants received a task which asked them to evaluate a political scenario and in turn were told that their responses would place them into one of two groups: unsophisticated and sophisticated decision making group. There was an additional group which participants were not aware of which was an unsophisticated group that had an 80% chance of affecting change in comparison to the other two groups that had a 1% of affecting change. Although participants thought that their responses were being evaluated they were actually arbitrarily placed in into one of the three groups while participants participated in a filler activity. After participants were informed of which group they were a member of they were given a survey in which they would rate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed (using a Likerd scale; 1 [strongly disagree] - 18 [strongly agree]) with statements regarding rights and duties, voting, and group membership.

The responses provided participants in the first experiment were compared using a one-way
ANOVA for all of the seven questions which tested to see if there was a significant difference between the ways that participants in the three different decision making groups reported they felt about their rights and duties. Although the means for the three groups in all seven questions were different, the ANOVAs indicated that significance could not be established for any of the seven questions.

In the second study the task used to place participants into the three different decision making groups (unsophisticated with a 1% chance of affecting change, unsophisticated with an 80% chance of affecting change, and the sophisticate group) was arbitrary. Participants were told to judge which of two knocks was louder and in turn based on that assessment they would be placed into either the unsophisticated or the sophisticated decision making group. However, participants again were arbitrarily placed into one of the groups arbitrarily while they performed a filler test. Participants were also not aware that there were two unsophisticated decision making groups which they could be a member of in the experiment. After participants were made aware of their group membership they were handed the same survey given to participants in the first experiment and were again instructed to indicate using the Likert scale whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements used in the first experiment.

Voting as a Right or a Duty

Again, ANOVA's were performed on the seven questions to see if there was a significant difference between the ways that the three groups responded to the seven statements. Although the means for the three groups in each question were different significance could only be established for question three between the way in which members of the unsophisticated group with a 1% percent of affecting change and the sophisticated group reported their level agreement with the statements (P<.05). Question three stated that "Individuals who do not keep up with political events, are not knowledgeable, and are members of the unsophisticated decision making group should still have the
right to vote in this election”. Members of the sophisticated group agreed with this assertion the least (m=12.88) whereas members of the unsophisticated group endorsed (m=15.9) the concept that members of the unsophisticated (even if they were not knowledgeable about the system) still had the right to vote.

When a comparison across the two experiments was performed t-tests were used to see whether there was a difference between the ways that members of the three groups answered the questions between the two experiments. Here there was only a significant difference found in two of the conditions: the unsophisticated group in question three (P<.012) and the sophisticated group in question four (P< .025). This was the main finding of the experiment: that is, the three decision making groups answered questions in the same way when participants were made to believe they were assessed based on their abilities and when participants were arbitrarily placed in a decision making group. An implication of this finding is that the perceived probability of impacting change need not be associated with voter attitudes and in turn that mere group identification has more of an influence than a perceived sense of having a legitimate reason to believe that as citizens there is certain criterion which one should have when participating in the electoral process. This assertion has been established in previous experiments regarding group identification and behavior but has until now not been used to test rights and duties in relation to the electoral process. In this experiment rights and duties were primarily affected by group identification opposed to having a perceived legitimate qualification to believe that voting was your personal duty.

Although these were the conclusions established by analyzing the data collected from the participants there are some limitations to the study. One of these limitations was that the sample of participants used in this study were university students. Nevertheless, even though the participants were
predominately students they still are all citizens of the United States and in turn have the right to vote. In this experiment significance could not be established between the groups and therefore it could not be conclusively established that when participants were deemed sophisticated and unsophisticated group members that this would affect how they perceived of rights and duties for their group members and members of other groups. It may have been possible to establish significance has there been more participants in each condition since the average number of participants in each group was rather small (m=24). Significance might be able to be established if these two experiments were repeated and more subjects were tested.

This is also the case with the variable testing the impact of being able to affect change would have on how participants rated the seven statements and in turn perceived of their and others rights and duties. Nevertheless, significance could not be established between the unsophisticated group with an 80% of affecting change and the other two groups which only had a 1% chance of affecting change. More research needs to be done to see the impact that perceived ability to affect change has on how citizens in the United States perceive their and others rights and duties to the electoral and political processes. This is currently the only literature and experiment which has tried to understand the impact that voter apathy has had on how citizens perceive their rights and duties and subsequently how the ability to affect change (or lack there of) has played a role in the decrease in voter participation in the United States. In comparison to other industrialized democracies citizens in the United States are not contributing and engaging in political processes that is a core component of the other 21 industrialized democratic societies and to the ideological conception of what encompasses a democratic society.
An industrial democracy is defined as a government which has a stable economy, an active civil life, and that the institutions that reside within the state (both governmental and non-governmental organizations) are legitimate, represent the states people, and are not corrupt.

Nevertheless, no study of this nature had been performed nor is there any conclusive evidence that sophisticated decision makers can accurately predict and make better decisions regarding the American political sphere.
References


