

# Do Voters Trust Other Voters?

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## Abstract

If a citizen abstains from voting, she effectively delegates her decision to others in the electorate. How much she values their decision, however, depends on whether she can trust them to share her objectives and to form well-reasoned opinions. Using decades of ANES data, this paper shows that citizens with better informed peers are empirically more likely to abstain from voting. This sheds rare light on one of the most fundamental questions of political theory: though often passionate about politics, voters seem implicitly to recognize that they might be wrong, and others' opinions might be better than their own. In other words, they view political decisions as a collective quest for objectively good policies, not merely as zero sum.

Keywords: turnout, information, voting, elections, common interest, jury theorem

## Introduction

One of the most fundamental questions in political theory is why voters disagree over policies. An immediate possibility is that voters simply have different interests: policy  $x$  favors one group while policy  $y$  favors another, creating inevitable conflict. In that case, no amount of persuasion should convince  $x$  supporters to vote for  $y$ , or vice versa. A more subtle possibility is that voters actually share a common objective, say to create a “good” society (e.g., promote freedom, safety, prosperity, and fairness and reduce crime, corruption, and pollution), but different information or life experiences lead one group to believe that policy  $x$  will accomplish their shared objective, while another sees  $y$  as more promising. In this case, sufficient deliberation might eventually produce consensus, with one (or both) sides conceding prior misunderstanding or flawed judgment.

The nature of voter disagreements is crucial for understanding the role of democracy: amid conflicts of interest, democracy can play a utilitarian role, favoring large groups over small groups (e.g., May, 1952); with *common interests*, democracy might serve to pool information, recognizing that many heads are better than one.<sup>2</sup> Different sources of disagreement also cast different light on political behaviors, such as polarization (McMurray, 2022): in zero-sum

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<sup>2</sup> Condorcet's (1785) classic “jury” theorem formalizes this, emphasizing that majority opinion in large electorates can be more accurate than any of the opinions of individual voters.

settings, centrist policies have utilitarian appeal, so political polarization must be attributed to democratic failure; with common interests, centrist policies can serve as a useful hedge against error but compromise between truth and error (e.g., half-implementing needed policy reforms).<sup>3</sup>

If all policies contribute to overall quality of life, it may be that *all* policy issues reduce to objective questions that voters could eventually agree on.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, even if some political questions have objective answers, others might be zero sum. It would be useful to distinguish empirically which policy disagreements reflect permanent conflicts of interest, and which merely reflect temporarily incomplete understanding, or how many belong to either category.

On reflection, this question may seem hopeless. Sometimes, of course, some voters switch sides (rather abruptly) on an issue, suggesting that information plays *some* role, and voters' efforts to persuade one another also suggest a hope that *some* of their opponents will share *some* of their preferences and be persuadable. But when discussion fails to resolve their differences, is that because differences are permanently irreconcilable? Or simply that further deliberation is needed? Clearly, policy judgments involve numerous considerations, drawn from innumerable life experiences and observations; these would be extremely difficult to communicate comprehensively in finite time. Until voters share literally *all* of their information, the possibility remains that further discussion would overcome remaining differences. For that matter, consensus could also be illusory: even when voters think they agree on an issue, further discussion might unearth differences.

It may not be possible to know whether voters' policy preferences ultimately coincide, but it may be possible to determine whether voters *behave* as if they think they do. To that end, voter participation offers rare insight: if a citizen abstains from voting, she implicitly trusts a policy decision to her peers. How much she values other voters' judgment depends on whether they *want* what she wants and, if they do, on how well *informed* they are. It has long been recognized that citizens with more information are empirically more likely to vote; if voters share a common interest, those with better informed peers should be more likely to abstain, to avoid the *swing voter's curse* of overturning an informed decision (Feddersen and Pesendorfer, 1996; McMurray, 2013).<sup>5</sup>

When interests conflict, informing a citizen's peers about *their* incentives does nothing to help them achieve *her* objectives, so peer information should not affect a citizen's participation decision in that case. Using seven decades of American National Election Studies (ANES) data, however, this paper confirms empirically that peer information affects a voter about as much as her own. Implicitly, then, citizens seem to recognize that their own opinions might be wrong, and that others' opinions might be better than their own. When they are sufficiently well

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<sup>3</sup> For additional behaviors that a common interest paradigm helps explain, see McMurray (2013, 2017a, 2017b, 2022, and 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Even if policy issues begin as zero sum, I show in McMurray (2017a) that large elections can dramatically amplify altruism, so that citizens who care only slightly about each of their neighbors behave asymptotically as neutral social planners, when the number of neighbors grows large. In promoting policies or candidates, voter rhetoric typically appeals to universal values (e.g., prosperity, freedom, fairness, or stability) rather than promises to favor narrow interests at the expense of other groups.

<sup>5</sup> This can explain abstention even in settings where voting would be costless, such as "roll off", or casting incomplete ballots.

informed, a voter seems to trust others to share her ultimate goals and make policy decisions on her behalf.

## Empirical Model

The first step in analyzing the impact of peer information is to divide voters into jurisdictions. For the central regression results, this means collecting voters who were surveyed in the same state in the same year.<sup>6</sup> Various information variables can be used to divide voters into low, medium, and high information levels, and within each jurisdiction, define *LowInfo* and *HighInfo* as the fractions of voters with low and high levels of information, respectively.<sup>7</sup> The basic identification strategy is simply to see whether voting correlates positively with *LowInfo* and negatively with *HighInfo*, as a voter with highly informed peers feels less confident in her ability to improve the election decision that other voters will make on her behalf, while a voter with poorly informed peers feels a greater desire to intervene.

Regressing voting on *LowInfo* and *HighInfo* would not adequately capture the importance of these variables because an individual's own information level, *OwnInfo*, contributes (mechanically) to these totals. It is well known that informed voters vote more frequently, so her voting decision may correlate with these variables even in the absence of a shared interest. The main probit regression of interest, given here as Equation 1, thus includes this variable separately, possibly among other controls.

$$voted = \beta_0 + \beta_1 OwnInfo + \beta_2 LowInfo + \beta_3 HighInfo + \beta_4 Controls + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

The hypothesis that voters react negatively to others' information simply amounts to the prediction that  $\beta_2$  is positive and  $\beta_3$  is negative.<sup>8</sup>

Because *OwnInfo* is included in the regression of Equation 1, identification of  $\beta_2$  and  $\beta_3$  can be understood by considering two individuals with the *same* information level who live in different states or different years. Though their own information is the same, one has a large number of highly informed peers while the other has a large number of poorly informed peers. The hypothesis of common interest is that the first individual should be less inclined to vote than the second.

There may be many factors other than information that impact an individual's willingness to vote. Such factors might also correlate with voter information, even if the relationship is not causal. Equation 1 uses fixed state (or other jurisdiction) and year effects to control for omitted

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<sup>6</sup> Primary elections are held separately for each political party, so the analysis of primary elections collects voters who live in the same state and year and belong to the same political party. The analysis of congressional elections collects voters in the same congressional district in the same year.

<sup>7</sup> These fractions are measured only among voters, since this is the group whose information a voter might displace if she votes. This assumes that individuals can accurately predict the conditional distribution of information among voters. If voters only know the unconditional distribution of information, it would be better to include nonvoters' information in the analysis. Doing so yields results similar to those below.

<sup>8</sup> The appendix presents a more intricate regression specification that allows peer information to influence a voter more flexibly, with similar results.

factors specific to a location that do not change over time, and time-specific factors that affect all locations.

## Data

The data used below come from the American National Election Studies (ANES) over nineteen presidential election years, 1948-2020.<sup>9</sup> Survey respondents are asked a battery of questions, both before and after national elections take place. The main variable of interest is voter information. After concluding their interviews, ANES interviewers were instructed to rate each survey respondent's "general level of information about politics and public affairs" on a five-point scale based on how informed they seem about politics. Survey respondents rated as information levels 1-2 are considered here to be poorly informed, while those rated as levels 4-5 are considered to be highly informed.<sup>10</sup> Though subjective, this variable is more comprehensive than specific knowledge questions. Subjectivity is also a strength, in the sense that what matters in the theory described above is how informed other voters *seem* to be.

Other proxies for information include a voter's education level, age, or income. Like information, income is measured on a five-point scale, so categories 1-2 are treated as low and 4-5 are treated as high. Education is measured on a four-point scale: respondents with high school education or less (levels 1-2) are considered to be poorly informed while college graduates (level 4) are considered to be highly informed. Age is measured in years: those below age 50 are considered to be poorly informed, while those over 60 are highly informed.<sup>11</sup>

The key outcome variable is voter participation. Four levels of participation are measured. First, did a survey respondent vote in the presidential election? In 18 election years (1952-2020), survey respondents were also asked whether they voted in the congressional election (on the same ballot as the presidential election). In ten years (1968-2020), they also reported whether they participated in the presidential primary elections for their state political party, held earlier that year. In eight elections (1952-1980), even nonvoters reported whether they at least registered to vote. As noted above, jurisdiction variables for these various regressions are either the respondent's state, congressional district, or state political party.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Non-presidential election years are excluded because reference populations vary across these elections: congressional elections occur at the congressional district level, but senatorial and gubernatorial elections occur at the state level.

<sup>10</sup> The main analysis uses interviewer assessments made before the election took place, which could be premature, as voters were still in the process of gathering political information. Assessments made after the election have fewer observations but yield similar results, as shown in the appendix.

<sup>11</sup> Regression results do not appear to be highly sensitive to the choice of cutoff.

<sup>12</sup> Political party affiliation is not recorded consistently in ANES data, so this designation relies on survey respondents indicating which party they favor (including respondents who designate themselves as independent but leaning in favor of one party or the other).

# Results

## Information and Voting

As noted above, the paper's central analysis focuses on voter turnout for presidential elections. Information is measured using interviewers' assessments (on a five-point scale) of each survey respondent. *OwnInfo* measures a voter's own information level, while *LowInfo* measures the fraction of citizens in the same state and year who have low information levels (1-2) and *HighInfo* measures the fraction with high information levels (4-5).

Table 1 displays this paper's main regression results. Columns 1 and 2 show the determinants of voting for president, with and without state and year fixed effects. Consistent with existing literature, more knowledgeable survey respondents vote more frequently. Coefficient estimates are statistically significant at the 1% level.

Table 1

<u>Peer Information and Voting</u>				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Voted for President	Voted for President	Completed Ballot	Completed Ballot
Respondent's Info	0.149*** (0.00256)	0.146*** (0.00257)	0.0554*** (0.00363)	0.0552*** (0.00359)
% of Peers with 'Low' Info	0.000697 (0.000445)	0.00158*** (0.000506)	0.000879*** (0.000292)	0.000807*** (0.000296)
% of Peers with 'High' Info	-0.00157*** (0.000290)	-0.00178*** (0.000326)	-0.000763*** (0.000175)	-0.000751*** (0.000179)
Fixed Effects	-	State, Year	-	District, Year
Reference Population	State voters	State voters	District voters	District voters
Observations	24,885	24,883	15,455	15,446

Table lists Probit marginal effects, evaluated at means. Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Survey respondents in states and years where higher fractions of the population have low information levels respond by voting more frequently (conditional on their own information levels). Those in states and years where higher fractions of the population have high information levels respond by voting less frequently. Both of these results are consistent with the strategic logic of the swing voter's curse. With fixed effects, both regression coefficients are significant at the 1% level.

Entries in Table 1 are marginal effects. To interpret the magnitudes of these effects, note that the outcome variable (voting) is either 0 or 1, a citizen's own information level ranges from 1 to 5, and the fractions of a voter's peers with low or high levels of information are percentages

between 0 and 100. Thus, for example, increasing a citizen's own information level by one makes her about 15 percentage points more likely to vote (according to the estimates in either column). If the fraction of a citizen's peers who possess low levels of information increased by ten percentage points then a citizen's likelihood of voting would increase by between 0.7 and 1.6 percentage points. If the fraction of her peers who possess high information levels increased by ten percentage points she would be between 1.6 and 1.8 percentage points less likely to vote. In total, if 10% of her peers increased from low information levels to high information levels, a citizen would be between 2.5 and 3.4 percentage points less likely to vote. If all of her peers increased in this way, she would be between 25 and 34 percentage points less likely to vote. In that sense, improving the information of a voter's peers could have as much effect as lowering her own information by about two levels.

Among citizens who voted for president, many completed their ballots by also voting for Congress, while many did not. Regressions 3 and 4 of Table 1 repeat the analysis of regressions 1 and 2, with the outcome of casting a complete ballot (conditional on voting at all). For these regressions, as explained above, the peers relevant for a voter's jurisdiction need to reside not only in the same state and year, but also the same congressional district. Regression 4 includes fixed effects for congressional district and year.

Coefficients in Columns 3 and 4 have the same signs as those in Columns 1 and 2, and all are significant at the 1% level (despite a smaller sample size<sup>13</sup>). Improving a citizen's information by one level makes her about 5.5 percentage points more likely to vote. Raising 10% of her peers from low information levels to high information levels makes her about 1.6 percentage points less likely to vote. Increasing all of her peers from low information to high information levels would thus make her about 16 percentage points more likely to vote. This effect is similar to that of lowering her own information quality by about three levels.

That information plays a role in two different types of elections attests to the robustness of the mechanism identified. Congressional elections are also special in that the cost of voting, which is traditionally thought of as the major obstacle to voting, has already been paid by a voter already in the voting booth voting in the presidential election. As Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1996) point out, a lack of information gives a plausible rationale for citizens to abstain even when voting is costless. That information effects are similar in both types of elections suggests that information, not voting costs (or a sense of duty, as proposed by Riker and Ordeshook, 1968, which can be viewed as a negative voting cost), plays the dominant role in determining participation.

## Other Political Participation

Table 2 applies the analysis above to other forms of voter participation. Regressions 5 and 6 repeat the analysis of regressions 1 and 2 for primary elections. Regressions 7 and 8 repeat the analysis again, but since primary elections are held within political parties, divide survey respondents not just by year and state but also by political party.

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<sup>13</sup> Columns 3 and 4 exclude both nonvoters and survey respondents who did not say whether or not they had voted in the congressional race.

Primary elections are of special interest, not only as a separate venue for confirming the importance of peer information, because many observers reject the assumption of common interests in general elections but are willing to apply it for voters within the same party. If peer information plays a much greater role in primary elections than in general elections then this suggests that common interest in general election settings is incomplete.

Regressions 9 and 10 restore year and state as the election jurisdiction, ignoring political party. The dependent variable in these regressions is voter registration, which is a preliminary form of participation.<sup>14</sup>

Table 2

Peer Information and Primary Voting / Voter Registration						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Voted in Primaries	Voted in Primaries	Voted in Primaries	Voted in Primaries	Registered to Vote	Registered to Vote
Respondent's Info	0.112*** (0.00341)	0.110*** (0.00324)	0.107*** (0.00405)	0.108*** (0.00391)	0.121*** (0.00444)	0.119*** (0.00441)
% of Peers with 'Low' Info	0.00118** (0.000541)	0.000735 (0.000627)	0.00258*** (0.000621)	0.00127** (0.000562)	0.00245*** (0.000620)	0.00209*** (0.000798)
% of Peers with 'High' Info	-0.000794** (0.000360)	-0.00150*** (0.000402)	-0.000398* (0.000208)	-0.000168 (0.000244)	-0.00115** (0.000482)	-0.00117* (0.000606)
Fixed Effects	-	State, Year	-	State-Party, Year	-	State, Year
Reference Population	State voters	State voters	State-party primary voters	State-party primary voters	State voters	State voters
Observations	16,329	16,329	13,316	13,315	6,630	6,630

Table lists Probit marginal effects, evaluated at means. Standard errors in parentheses.  
 \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Results in Table 2 follow the same pattern as Table 1: improved information makes a citizen more likely to participate politically, whether in presidential primaries or in voter registration, but conditional on her own information, a citizen is less inclined to participate when others' information improves. Most of the regression coefficients in Table 2 are statistically significant at standard levels. Based on these estimates, raising other voters all from low information to high information levels would have an effect similar to reducing the citizen's own information two or three levels.

## Other Information Measures

This section repeats the analysis above with different proxies for voter information: education, age, and income. One reason for this analysis is to explore the robustness of the main finding above, that the information of a voter's peers matters for a voter's participation decision. Related to this is the question of what information variables best capture essential voter information.

<sup>14</sup> Sample sizes in regressions 9 and 10 are smaller because only certain survey waves reported voter registration.

A possible concern with the interviewer assessment of informedness used above is that it is subjective: different interviewers might estimate the same voter's information level differently. The information measures used in this section are objective, which in that light may be viewed as a strength.<sup>15</sup>

Education and age are natural sources of political understanding. Income is plausibly related to political information in that more intelligent voters likely have both. On the other hand, if income and information are correlated then another concern for the analysis above is that the apparent importance of voter information, which should matter for common interest decisions as explained above, might actually reflect the importance of voter income, which might matter somehow because of private interests.

Regressions 15 and 16 in Table 4 analyze the importance of education for (presidential election) voting, with and without fixed state and year effects. Education is measured on a four-point scale; those with a high school degree or less (levels 1-2) are designated as poorly informed while those with a college degree (level 4) as highly informed. Regressions 17 and 18 repeat the analysis using age as a proxy for information; those with ages below 50 are poorly informed while those with ages above 60 are highly informed.

Table 3

Peer Education / Age / Income and Voting						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Voted for President	Voted for President	Voted for President	Voted for President	Voted for President	Voted for President
Respondent's Info	0.113*** (0.00287)	0.111*** (0.00286)	0.0359*** (0.00181)	0.0351*** (0.00180)	0.0790*** (0.00224)	0.0739*** (0.00223)
% of Peers with 'Low' Info	0.00249*** (0.000285)	0.000988** (0.000389)	0.000391*** (0.000129)	0.000161 (0.000149)	0.0000796 (0.000310)	0.000225 (0.000354)
% of Peers with 'High' Info	-0.000438** (0.000219)	-0.000958*** (0.000326)	-0.000230* (0.000123)	-0.000282* (0.000168)	0.0000997 (0.000284)	0.0000959 (0.000347)
Information Variable	Education	Education	Age	Age	Income	Income
Fixed Effects	-	State, Year	-	State, Year	-	State, Year
Reference Population	State voters	State voters	State voters	State voters	State voters	State voters
Observations	46,297	46,297	31,330	31,328	44,009	44,009

Table lists Probit marginal effects, evaluated at means. Standard errors in parentheses.  
 \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

The results of this analysis are as before: voting increases with a voter's own information but decreases as others in the jurisdiction are better informed. As before, the magnitudes of the estimated strategic effects are substantial: increasing all of a citizen's peers from low information to high information levels would reduce voting by about as much as reducing the

<sup>15</sup> To the extent that interviewer subjectivity introduces noise, I point out below that the regression estimates above *understate* the effect of peer information on voting. As noted above, subjectivity may also improve accuracy somewhat, in that theoretically, it is not a voter's true information that affects peers' voting decisions, but how informed that voter *seems* to others.

citizen's own information by one or two levels. Most of the coefficients in these regressions are also statistically significant at the 1% level, and almost all are significant at the 10% level.

Regressions 19 and 20 repeat this analysis using income as a proxy for voter information. In contrast with earlier results, coefficient estimates are not statistically significant, and are small in magnitude. Coefficients on the fraction of the jurisdiction who are highly informed are positive instead of negative. By these estimates, raising all of her peers from low information to high information levels would reduce voting only by one sixth as much as reducing the citizen's own income one level, and might even *increase* the citizen's willingness to vote.

That income does not follow the pattern of the other information variables suggests both that income is not an effective proxy of relevant voter information, and that the consistent results obtained for other information proxies are not merely artifacts borrowing significance from their correlation with income.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

Whether policy disagreements reflect tentative misunderstanding about a shared interest or irreconcilable conflict is one of the most fundamental questions of political theory, shaping both the behavioral and the welfare predictions associated with various political institutions. As important as this question is, obtaining direct evidence of either paradigm seems hopeless. This paper has made progress by testing a prediction that arises only in common interest settings, namely that a voter becomes *less* likely to vote when her peers become better informed. This prediction is confirmed as robust for several instances of voter participation and for several proxies of voter information.

The data generating process here is likely to be noisy: a voter is likely imperfect (and perhaps even biased) at estimating her own and others' information quality, and may perceive some level of conflict (whether illusory or real) with other voters; even if they share an interest in social welfare, conflicts may arise between voters who favor different welfare functions; interviewers may assess voter information differently than voters assess one another; and jurisdictions may have too few observations to eliminate sampling error in the estimated distribution of peer information.<sup>17</sup> All of these sources of noise should mute the estimated coefficient magnitudes, suggesting that the estimates presented above may *understate* the importance of peer information. That results remain significant despite such noise and with so many fixed effects in each regression attests to the robustness of the underlying strategic behavior.

Supplementary regressions not presented here suggest that the effects above have been consistent over time: coefficient magnitudes correlate negatively with a linear time trend, but by a small amount that is statistically insignificant.<sup>18</sup> The patterns above seem equally

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<sup>16</sup> Further corroborating that conclusion, the appendix shows that controlling separately for income does not substantially impact the main results obtained in Table 1.

<sup>17</sup> Regressions that exclude jurisdictions with fewer than 25 observations yield qualitatively similar results.

<sup>18</sup> Coefficient estimates are noisy, but yearly changes larger than 1% can be ruled out.

prevalent among Democrat and Republican voters.<sup>19</sup> As the appendix shows, peer information also has a consistent impact when specified more flexibly than in Equation 1.

That a common interest paradigm finds similar (or even greater) support in general elections than in party primaries suggests that common interest applies quite generally, not just narrowly as some observers have supposed. That the decision to vote and the decision to cast a complete ballot react so similarly to peer information suggests that information is more important for voter participation decisions than are voting costs, which have received greater attention in existing literature.

With no other apparent explanation, this paper has interpreted the negative correlation between peer information and voting as a causal relationship. In case the results above reflect some unforeseen omitted variables bias, a useful direction for future work would be to strengthen this causal identification. If enough individuals move across jurisdictions, for example, panel data could supplement the regressions above by including individual voter fixed effects. Voters who have recently moved may be less likely in general to vote, but the findings above would be corroborated if they disproportionately abstain when living in jurisdictions with the best informed peers.

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<sup>19</sup> Point estimates suggest that Democrats may respond slightly more to poorly informed peers and slightly less to highly informed peers, but estimates are noisy and neither difference is statistically significant.

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