

Social norms and elections

How elected rules can make behavior (in)appropriate

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Introduction: Social Norms

- Social norms are shared understandings about the appropriate actions for a particular situation (Crawford and Ostrom, 1995)
- Social norms matter for individual behavior
 - Most individuals tend to learn and follow social norms, leading to a willingness to constrain selfish behavior (Ostrom, 2000)
 - Norm conformity can explain behavior in a variety of social contexts (Kedia and Pareek, 2021; Krupka et al., 2017; Gaechter et al., 2017)

Introduction: Elections and Individual Behavior

Election outcomes can change attitudes and behavior:

- Brexit referendum 2016: As a result, "anti-immigrant and anti-foreigner rhetoric had become normalised", making Britain effectively a "more racist country" (The Times, May 12, 2018)
- US presidential election 2016: Trump's election "raises fears of increased violence against women", "[...] normalizes abusive behavior and gives implicit permission for others to perpetuate it." (The Huffington Post, 2016)
- Scholars argue that changes in people's behavior following these political events can indeed be attributed to a change in social norms (Albornoz et al., 2020; Bursztyn et al., 2020)
- Evidence that elections and referenda can also lead to a collective shift towards more tolerant attitudes and inclusive behavior (Baskaran and Hessami, 2018; Kedia and Pareek, 2021; Jung and Tavits, 2021)

Can elections causally shift people's ideas of what is socially appropriate?

Note that,

- ... election results are, by nature, not exogenous to the society in which social norms develop.
- ... behavioral effects could be attributed to other (unobservable?) factors that also correlate with the election outcome.
- ... in the existing field studies and surveys, the effect of elections on social norms is inferred indirectly from observed behavior or stated preferences.

Can elections causally shift people's ideas of what is socially appropriate?

This talk:

- We conduct a controlled online experiment in which we exogenously vary whether and how a referendum has taken place.
- We directly measure social norms in an incentive compatible way (Krupka and Weber 2013).
- The shifts in social norms are related to actual behavior in a different experiment.

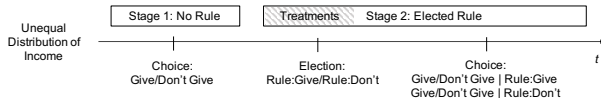
Experimental Design

Experimental Design: Setup

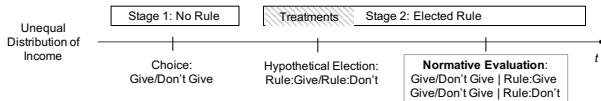
- *Norms experiment*: Participants are asked to rate actions by their social appropriateness
- The scenario described to participants is an actual decision situation from a previous *behavior experiment* (Apffelstaedt & Freundt 2022)
 - Income is unequally distributed and individuals can choose to "Give" or "Don't Give"
 - The giving decision is made in an individual decision and then again after the election of a "code of conduct" in a referendum
 - The code of conduct say either that "Everybody should choose Give" (Rule:Give) or "Everybody should choose Don't Give" (Rule:Don't)
- Participants rate actions in the absence and in the presence of a rule

Experimental Design: Election of Rules

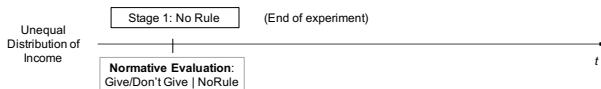
a) Behavior Experiment (Apffelstaedt and Freundt, 2022)



b) Norms Experiment: **Election** Treatments



c) Norms Experiment: **NoRule** Treatment

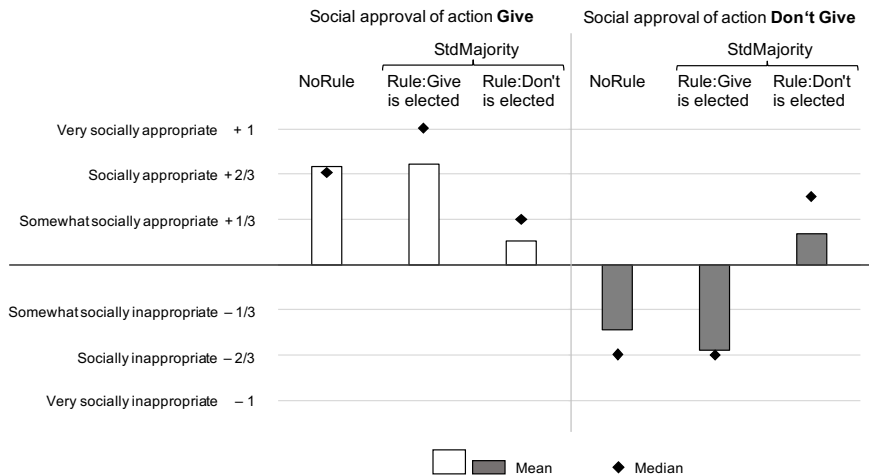


Data Collection

- Online experiment with 600 participants on Prolific Academic
- Duration about 15 minutes, base payment 2£, plus a possible bonus of 2£ for the norm elicitation task
- Participants:
 - Mean age 28.73 years (SD 9.59), 46.60 percent female, 38.87 percent students
 - The largest share of participants have a British nationality (38 percent British nationality, 11.6 percent US Americans, share of 'Western' subjects is 78.16 percent
 - Share of subjects choosing action Give in stage 1 is .63, .67, .62, and .65

Results

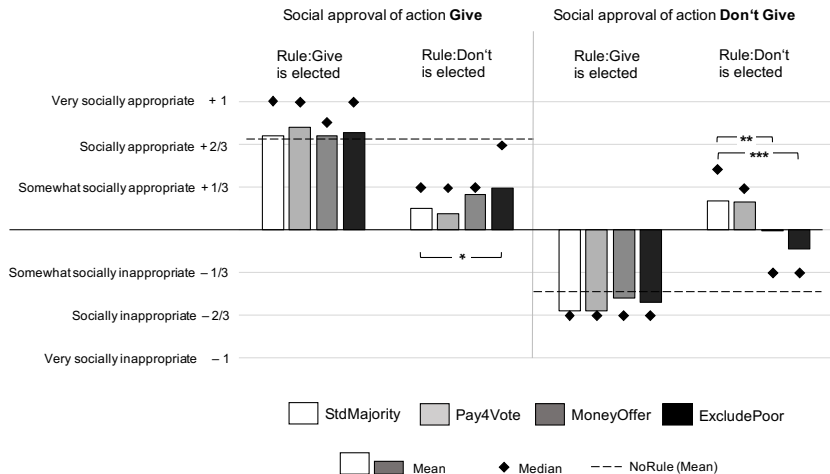
Social Approval Ratings



Social Approval Ratings

- Majority-elected rules shift social norms: The election of Rule:Give makes action Give (Don't Give) more (less) socially appropriate. The election of Rule:Don't makes action Don't Give (Give) more (less) socially appropriate.
- The election of Rule:Don't shifts social norms relative to NoRule to a greater extent than the election of Rule:Give.
- Majority-elected rules can cause actions previously judged socially inappropriate to become socially appropriate.

Flawed Elections



Flawed Elections

- While Pay4Vote has the same power as StdMajority, elected rules shift social approval ratings significantly less in MoneyOffer and ExcludePoor.
- Elected rules can shift social norms, but bribing voters or excluding parts of the electorate weaken this ability.

Shifts in Social Norms Can Predict Behavior

Dep. Var.	Utility according to Eq. (1)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Appropriateness rating (γ)	1.347*** (.103)	1.371*** (.106)	1.403*** (.143)	1.444*** (.148)
Appropriateness rating X				
Pay4Vote			-.194 (.192)	-.233 (.198)
MoneyOffer			.248 (.216)	.203 (.221)
ExcludePoor			-.154 (.199)	-.140 (.199)
Constant (<i>const</i>)	-.944 (.125)	-1.656 (.393)	-.970 (.130)	-1.671 (.393)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	1200	1182	1200	1182
(Subjects)	(400)	(394)	(400)	(394)
Log-likelihood	-746.8	-725.9	-742.7	-722.4

Robust standard errors (clustered at subject level) in parentheses.

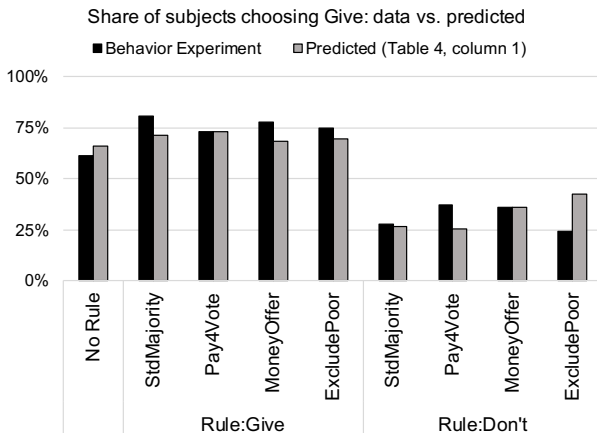
* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Controls in columns (2) and (4) are: female (1/0), age (continuous), student (1/0), and Western (1/0).

Shifts in Social Norms Can Predict Behavior

- Using choice data from the behavior experiment in Apffelstaedt and Freundt (2022), we predict a one-step increase in the mean approval rating of an action to increase the probability of taking that action by on average 10 percentage points.
- Election-induced norm shifts can predict behavior change (imperfectly).

Shifts in Social Norms Can Predict Behavior

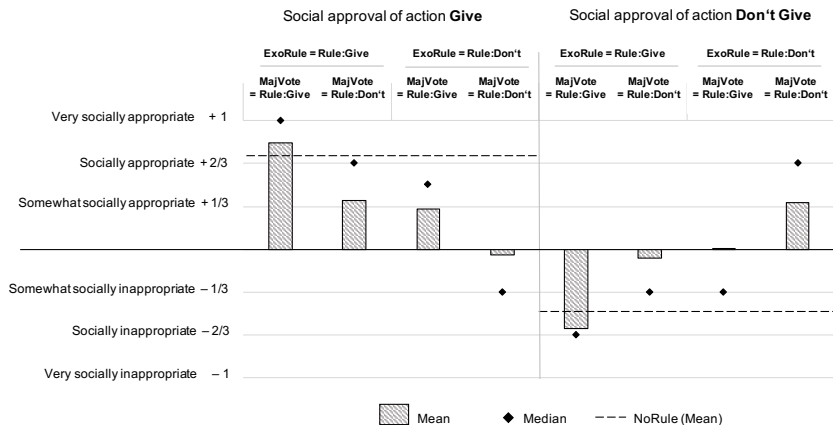


Mechanisms: Additional Treatment

What drives the shifts in social appropriateness ratings? The informational content of majority elections or the social appropriateness of following rules?

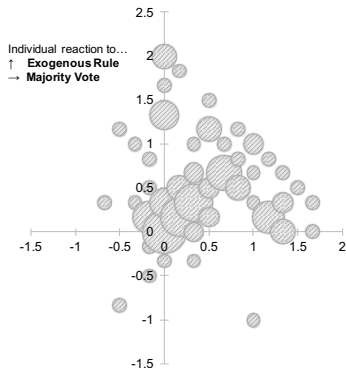
- Additional treatment using the strategy method: a rule is selected exogenously and in addition, subjects get information about the voting preferences of the majority of subjects (2x2)

Mechanisms



Mechanisms: Heterogeneity

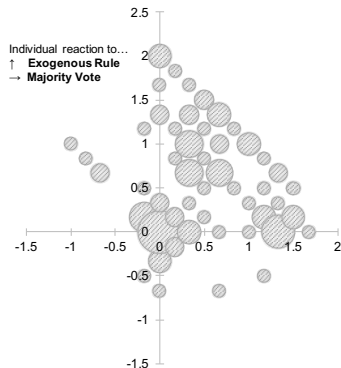
Shifts in individual ratings of action **Give**
(if Rule:Don't → Rule:Give)



X-Axis: [Avg.Rating(Give) | MajVote = Rule:Give]
 - [Avg.Rating(Give) | MajVote = Rule:Don't]

Y-Axis: [Avg.Rating(Give) | ExoRule = Rule:Give]
 - [Avg.Rating(Give) | ExoRule = Rule:Don't]

Shifts in individual ratings of action **Don't Give**
(if Rule:Give → Rule:Don't)



X-Axis: [Avg.Rating(Don't Give) | MajVote = Rule:Don't]
 - [Avg.Rating(Don't Give) | MajVote = Rule:Give]

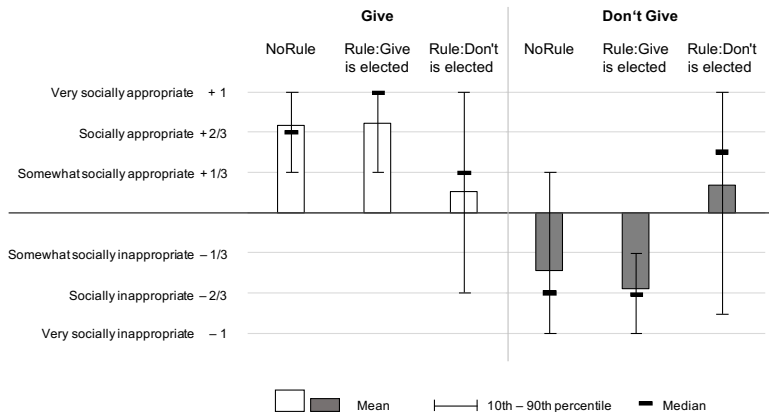
Y-Axis: [Avg.Rating(Don't Give) | ExoRule = Rule:Don't]
 - [Avg.Rating(Don't Give) | ExoRule = Rule:Give]

Mechanisms

- Both, a change in the exogenous rule and a change in the majority vote have a very significant, similar and sizeable effect on social norms
- A majority of subjects behaves in a way that is in line with the aggregate effect (their ratings respond to both modifications).

Preliminary Result

Elicited Norms: NoRule vs. Baseline (Simple Majority) Election of Rule:Give/Rule:Don't



Preliminary Result

- Elections do not only have the potential to cause a shift in modal, median and mean social appropriateness ratings but also an increase in the variance of the distribution of individual ratings.
- Can elections decrease 'norm consensus', i.e. in the degree to which members of a society agree on which action constitutes "the right thing to do"?

Conclusion

- Elections can strongly impact perceptions of injunctive norms.
- Actions previously judged socially inappropriate can become socially appropriate.
- Previously existing norm consensus can possibly be eroded.
- The power of elections is weakened if the procedure is flawed.
- Shifts in social norms willingness can predict people's willingness to voluntarily comply with rules.

→ Importance of democratic procedures in general, and elections in particular, for the formation and dissolution of social norms in a society

Thank you!