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Assessing the Effects of Heuristic Perceptions on Voter Turnout

Amanda Aziz
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Assessing the Effects of Heuristic Perceptions on Voter Turnout

A Thesis Presented

by

AMANDA AZIZ

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Assessing the Effects of Heuristic Perceptions on Voter Turnout

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Approved as to the style and content by:

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Scott Blinder, Chair

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Brian Schaffner, Member

_____
Jane Fountain, Department Head
Department of Political Science

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents, Dick and Patty, who have always stressed the

value of hard work and perseverance in all things, and who allowed me to focus on

my education in such a concentrated and accelerated environment. And also to my

younger brothers Dicky, Luke, and Danny, for whom I have strived to be an

educational role model for the last 16 years.

ABSTRACT

ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF HEURISTIC PERCEPTIONS

ON VOTER TURNOUT

MAY 2016

AMANDA AZIZ, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Scott Blinder

Democracy in the United States operates under two contradictory norms: that it is a civic duty to vote, and that it is irresponsible to cast an uninformed vote. Do these contrasting norms suppress voter turnout? Why do some uninformed Americans turn out to vote while others do not? This study seeks to understand the information barriers that Americans perceive to be in the way of voting by studying how voters and nonvoters differ in their perceptions of the importance of various heuristics. By analyzing a 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study survey question that measures respondents' prioritization of these information shortcuts, this study is able to understand how the prioritization of certain heuristics is associated with turnout rates. I find that high prioritization of the partisan identification heuristic and the heuristic based on the candidate a respondent's friend supports is associated with higher turnout rates. I argue that this is because of the density of information offered by each heuristic and their usefulness in aiding in the decision-making process for potential voters. I conclude that perception of the usefulness of heuristics matters to turnout, and that this is a start to understanding how information costs may hinder turnout where it would otherwise exist.

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CHAPTER I

SUPPRESSED VOTER TURNOUT

<u>Introduction</u>

"As soon as you look at the civil and political society of the United States, you
discover two great facts that dominate all the others and from which the
others are derived. Democracy constitutes the social state; the dogma of the
sovereignty of the people, the political law . . . Sovereignty of the people is
always more or less a fiction wherever democracy is not established"
(Tocqueville 1835).

Popular sovereignty has been linked to democracy as a tenet of American

values and political life since the early years of the nation, yet in the modern era

citizen participation and voter turnout have declined—even though the proportion

of the population eligible to vote has increased through the passage of constitutional

amendments and voting rights legislation for women, blacks, and citizens at least 18

years of age. In a society where voting is considered a civic duty, why have turnout

rates been declining as the electorate is growing?

One reason for this counterintuitive situation could be the fact that although

"the right to vote is regarded with reverence in American civic culture" (Rolfe 2012

7), there is a counter-norm working against it that enforces the idea that it is

irresponsible to cast an uninformed vote. Lack of information is seen as something

that must be "overcome" in order for many citizens to vote (Lupia 1994a; Lupia

1994b; Lupia and McCubbins 1998), and low-information voters who are unreliable,

irrational, and have inconsistent ideologies and opinions regarding issues and

candidates have become the focus of many critiques of democracy (Campbell et. al

1960; Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). Voting has been a right that enfranchised

citizens have enjoyed since the founding and one that has been fought for by many

demographics throughout our nation's history. It is a practice that has been viewed as an act of patriotism among the American public for decades. In a *New York Times* poll from 1983, 83% of respondents said that voting was a sign of patriotism (Yankee Doodle Polling 2015). In a 2002 poll from the Harwood Institute, 97% of respondents agreed that voting was an important part of patriotism (Yankee Doodle Polling 2015). In a 2014 Fox News poll 93% of respondents considered voting in elections an act of patriotism (Yankee Doodle Polling 2015). "Voting" topped the list of patriotic acts in the first two polls while it was nudged out by one percentage point by "flying an American flag" in the Fox News poll. Where "joining the armed forces" was an available option, voting was seen as more patriotic (Yankee Doodle Polling 2015).

As voting is the only way to have citizens' preferences implemented in legislation, low turnout rates have concerned both American citizens as well as scholars of American politics for many years (Merriam and Gosnell 1924; Aldrich 1993; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Brady et al. 1995; Rolfe 2012; Sinclair 2012). While messages encouraging citizens to participate in their democracy and campaigns that prompt people to register and "get out the vote" are common in American society, messages discouraging uninformed, "irresponsible" voting have become prominent on the Internet as well (Granderson 2011; McArdle 2014; Somin 2014; Gaughan 2015). In fact, in a November 2014 Huffington Post poll run by the professional polling company YouGov which asked "Do you feel that all eligible Americans should vote, or should people only vote if they are well-informed about the election?" 46% responded, "all eligible American citizens should vote," 42%

responded, "only people who are well informed should vote," and 12% were not

sure. However 60% of millennial respondents said, "only people who are well

informed should vote," and the frequency of this response tapered off quickly as the

age demographic increased. Clearly the contrasting norms are at odds with each

other, and may originate from varying ideas about what constitutes a healthy

democracy. Although the origin of these norms is beyond the scope of this paper, it

is important to understand that the tension between voting and having enough

information to do so could be suppressing voter turnout where it would otherwise

exist.

Figure 1: Huffington Post/YouGov Poll November 2014

Who should vote?

■ All eligible American citizens ■ Only people who are well-informed
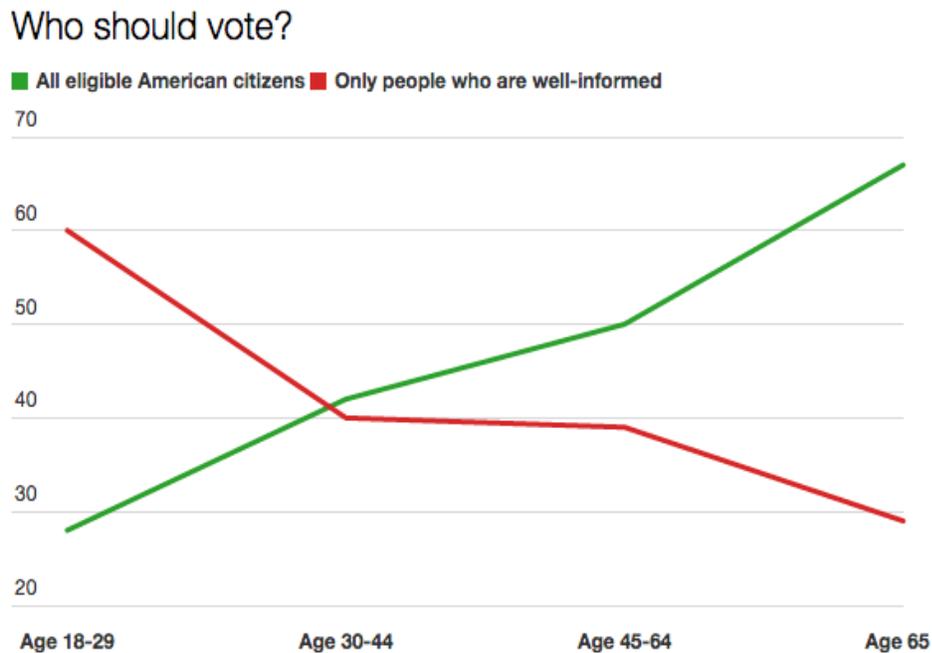
Figure 1. Depicts the frequency of responses to the question "Do you feel that all eligible Americans should vote, or should people only vote if they are well-informed about the election?" according to age group. Source: Huffington Post

How can Americans reconcile the norms that state it is a duty to vote but that

an uninformed vote is irresponsible? What exactly defines an informed vote in the

eyes of citizens? This is a question about information and the information barriers that Americans might perceive stand in the way of voting. This project seeks to understand how voters and nonvoters differ in their perceptions of the importance or usefulness of various information shortcuts—heuristics. If we can understand how these two groups look at heuristics differently, we may be able to understand more about the information barriers that keep some people from turning out to vote while others participate regularly.

This paper will evaluate the current literature on voter turnout in American elections and heuristic processing among voters. In developing a heuristic-based explanation for voter turnout, this paper will show that there is space for a new theory at the intersection of these literatures, and support the importance of voter turnout as a measure of the health of American democracy. Using data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) 2012 public opinion survey, this paper will investigate the perceptions of the importance of the following heuristics: party identification, local newspaper endorsement, candidate occupation, candidate gender, candidate race, the candidate a respondent's friends support, and candidate religion. CCES respondents were asked to rank the importance of each heuristic in making a decision about which candidate to hypothetically vote for without having any other information on the candidate. This survey question gives political scientists a clear understanding of which decision-making aids respondents value. I predict that there will be a difference between the types of heuristics that voters and non-voters value, and these differences may help explain why some less engaged citizens vote while others do not.

Importance of Turnout

Voting is the bare minimum required for a democracy to run properly, and therefore it is a particularly important component of political participation. Additionally, unlike campaigning or donating, it is the only form of participation that citizens feel a civic duty to fulfill (Rolfe 2012). It is "the most common and important act of political participation in any democracy" (Aldrich 1993). In an ideal democracy, politicians would be directly responsive to the citizens who vote for them and citizens would be well informed and politically sophisticated enough to choose candidates who represent their preferences in the legislature and hold them accountable when they do not represent the interests of the citizens. Whether a representative acts as a delegate or a trustee, there is ideally an understanding and trust between the principal and agent, which citizens communicate by voting for a candidate. Participation in a candidate's campaign shows engagement with politics but if no one turns out to vote for the candidate the campaign effort is in vain. Monetary contributions may help a candidate buy more airtime on television and attract citizen attention, but voting is the crucial step—citizens must make the choice to turn out on Election Day in order for any of these gestures to count. With turnout being such an important aspect of American democracy and the study of American politics, it is problematic that so little has been studied in the area of information-based or heuristic-based turnout.

Turnout Literature

The phenomenon of voter turnout has always been a salient research topic in political science because of the correctly perceived importance of voting to the

health of a democracy. Early research on voter turnout was especially concerned with the normative value of voting and asked the question of why many Americans neglected to fulfill their civic duty by abstaining from voting in various elections (Merriam and Gosnell 1924). For years much of the voter turnout research sought to address this normatively negative aspect of democracy, which placed nonvoters at fault for not participating, and resulted in non-voters being painted in a negative light (Rolfe 2012). With the introduction of a rational choice model of voter turnout, the question of voter turnout became inverted so as to ask why anyone bothers to vote in the first place (Downs 1957). Voter turnout seemed to be the paradox that rational choice models could not address with the classic cost-benefit equation $pB > C$ until the inclusion of a duty term updated the equation to read $pB + D > C$, where "duty" represents any additional benefit that a voter can obtain from voting, making the benefit greater than the cost (Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Aldrich 1993). This reinforced the normative value of voting as a civic "duty." The rational choice model led to research that was driven by the "cost" side of the voting equation. This is where I believe a heuristic take on voter turnout may fit into the literature because certain heuristics, as information shortcuts and decision-making aids, can lower the information cost of voting for many citizens, making them feel as if they are "informed voters" and potentially increase voter turnout by easing concerns about the information-based counter-norm.

Political scientists sought to understand what exactly constituted the "cost" of voting and what made this cost vary for different people. The resource model of political participation was an important development that helped scholars

understand how exactly socioeconomic status (SES) affects voting, monetary contributions, and time-consuming political investments (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman 1995). The model goes "beyond SES" by defining and measuring three resources critical to political participation: time, money, and civic skills. The authors find that for the act of voting, "seemingly the least demanding form of political activity" (Brady et al. 1995 283), political interest and civic skills are the most important resources needed or utilized to participate. However, both political interest and civic skills are related to education and income. People with higher levels of these resources are more likely to have a higher SES and a greater opportunity to learn and develop civic skills as well as interact with a homogenous group of people who can provide and receive political information in a feedback loop. Scholars have understood the cost of voting to be a barrier to many Americans and an important predictor of turnout. People for whom the cost of voting is lower—whether this is an information cost or monetary cost—are more likely to turn out to vote. Therefore people who can prioritize certain effective heuristics as shortcuts and decision-making aids may be able to lower the cost of voting for themselves, becoming more likely to vote and feel efficacious in their vote choice.

People of higher SES status who turn out to vote as a result of high civic skills and political sophistication are parts of social networks that may also contain nonvoters. The social context is therefore another important strand of voter turnout literature. Social theories of voter turnout often include mobilization and canvassing effects (Gerber & Green 2000; Nickerson 2008; Gerber et al. 2008; Rolfe 2012), but also focus on the importance of cues exchanged within social networks (Rolfe 2012;

Sinclair 2012). Elections and the act of voting do not occur within a vacuum, and the decision to turn out is affected by many facets of political and social life. Although it may be time consuming (and therefore costly) to go to the polls on Election Day, voters are motivated by other factors: the "warm fuzzies" they experience after fulfilling a civic duty, the social pressure to conform to this norm, and influences from other voters—the people they interact with in their social networks (Sinclair 2012; Rolfe 2012). These social effects are often not found in rational choice and cost-based research on voter turnout but they are important to consider—they may themselves be information shortcuts that citizens consider when deciding whether or not to vote. Citizens pick up on cues from their friends and coworkers and may base the decision to vote and even base their vote choice on what they hear or see in these networks.

Meredith Rolfe (2012) provides the most comprehensive version of this social theory, which works on the individual and aggregate levels and provides a strong tie between the importance of social networks and mobilization, truly advancing her claim that all turnout is mobilized:

> "Higher-intensity campaigns make politics and the upcoming election more salient, not only in increased political discussion among friends, but also in other prominent cues that may indicate to citizens that their friends, neighbors, and coworkers care about the election. Increases in media coverage, campaign signs, mail and phone contact from candidates, and the like—all of these signals increase the size of the effective reference group for any potential voter when making the turnout decision. Thus, in effect, the social networks relevant to the turnout decision become larger as mobilization increases the salience of the election" (Rolfe 2012 100).

Rolfe argues that vote choices and even the choice to turn out to vote are often products of social heuristics within social networks. She calls the users

of these social cues "conditional decision makers" who will make the decision to vote when they are exposed to a certain amount of electoral information in their social networks. These choices do not need to be conscious, but conditional decision makers recognize these cues within their social network based on the salience that campaigns generate around elections and make the decision to vote based on the fact that other people they know are doing so (Rolfe 2012 22). I would argue that these are social heuristics because uninformed members of social networks receive information about friends' vote choices and election activity and are able to infer how they should act when it comes time to decide to turn out to vote. While the social theory is less concerned with an individual's resources and more focused on how their networks influence them to turn out, it can still be considered on the periphery of cost-centric theories of voter turnout because the cues and shortcuts provided by the more politically active members of a social network can lower the cost of voting for the less politically active or less knowledgeable members of the group.

These existing theories of voter turnout are well thought out, empirically solid, and extensive. They focus on voters and explain why citizens who vote do so. However this paper is concerned with understanding how voters and nonvoters perceive the usefulness of various heuristics and if these potential differences in perception affect the likelihood of turning out. It asks a question about information as a cost and heuristics as resources and cues in the eyes of potential voters, who are "conditional decision-makers" (Rolfe 2012). Which heuristics do voters tend to

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find most compelling, compared to nonvoters? Do some people abstain from voting because they feel they do not have enough information to do so? Or because they do not know which shortcuts to use to effectively pick a candidate? Are they afraid that their uninformed ballot is irresponsible?

Political scientists know that education and political sophistication do have an effect on voter turnout and vote choice (Zaller 1992, Lassen 2005, Prior 2007), mostly among the voting population, but we do not know how voters and nonvoters differ in their perceptions of different information shortcuts. My heuristic-based turnout explanation exists at this intersection of cost and information—the people who perceive using certain heuristics as an effective way of making a decision see the cost of voting to be lower than people who do not understand how to prioritize useful heuristics. Heuristics can be helpful to many Americans in making decisions to turn out to vote, but they may also benefit the more educated and politically sophisticated population who can prioritize the heuristics that convey the most useful information. This may allow higher SES people who are on the fence about voting to correctly perceive which heuristics are most helpful in making a decision to vote because they understand which political considerations are most important in the process. They may also benefit from increased confidence in their actual vote choice and feel like they are making an effective contribution to their democracy by having some inferred information through a decision making aid rather than going out to vote blindly. Essentially, each heuristic offers a shortcut to various types and levels of information, and some are more useful than others when deciding whether or not to vote. The people who perceive the more effective heuristics as being

important are different than those people who prioritize inherently less effective

heuristics, and their turnout rates will reflect that.

CHAPTER II

INFORMATION AND VOTING

Heuristics Literature

As has been previously alluded to, for the purposes of this paper "heuristics" will be defined as information shortcuts or decision-making aids. They are pieces of information but they are just small representations of the kinds of information one can infer from them. They are useful because they "reduce the complex tasks of assessing probabilities and predicting values to simpler judgmental operations" (Tversky and Kahneman 1974 1124). For example, the party identification heuristic is useful because knowing if a candidate is a Republican or a Democrat will give many Americans an idea about where the candidate stands on a variety of issues. It is one of the most effective heuristics a voter can use because it is information-dense: it offers a shortcut to concrete policy information and gives cues about where candidates stand on a variety of issues. If a potential voter knows their own party identification or that of their family, knowing this shortcut can help them make a vote choice (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler 2002). The usefulness of this heuristic does depend on a person's partisan strength and their understanding of the values of each party, however. A potential voter cannot see a candidate's Democratic Party identification and understand how that benefits them without first understanding that they also identify as a Democrat. Indeed, studies have proven the importance of the partisan heuristic through examination of nonpartisan local and state elections in Illinois, Nebraska, Kansas, and North Carolina in which the removal or absence of party identification suppressed turnout (Schaffner, Streb, & Wright 2001).

While many academics and ordinary citizens lament the lack of political

interest and sophistication among the American public, some scholars point out

how unrealistic it is to expect Americans to know all the relevant information in a

given election, and these scholars advance the usefulness of heuristics in their

theorizing about participation and specifically vote choice. In the famous California

car insurance experiment, it was proved "that access to a particular class of widely

available information shortcuts allowed badly informed voters to emulate the

behavior of relatively well informed voters" (Lupia 1994a 63). Essentially, the

effective use of heuristics can almost completely remove any other information

barriers that citizens would otherwise have to traverse in order to vote correctly

(Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994a; Lupia 1994b; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). These

studies focus almost exclusively on vote choice and find that uninformed voters who

use heuristics are able to make the same decisions and vote the same way that

informed voters do. However, it is important that citizens perceive the correct

heuristics as being important, and that the heuristics they choose will make them

perceive that they can vote effectively (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). For example,

respondents who rank religion as the most important information shortcut used

when considering whom to vote for may have a harder time deciding as Election

Day draws near, as the field is usually comprised of predominantly Protestant

candidates. Heuristics such as party identification and the candidate the

respondent's friends are voting for may be more useful in narrowing down the field

and picking a candidate that represents the respondent. Therefore the use of these

heuristics may increase the benefit of voting because they make citizens feel like

their votes are more effective and worthwhile. Citizens who do not realize they can use information shortcuts or those that use ineffective heuristics for their purposes may not end up voting because they still have considerable information barriers to overcome and they may not be invested in their vote because they do not feel confident in it.

Most of the literature on cognitive heuristics asks questions of whether they improve the decision-making capabilities of the people using them (Tversky & Kahneman 1974; Lau & Redlawsk 1997; Lau & Redlawsk 2001; Lau & Redlawsk 2006). The heuristics literature almost exclusively focuses on vote choice, and political scientists have found that the most common type of information sought out during campaigns is typically not extensive information on policy stances and other values, but rather it is information that is shallow and easy to access—essentially heuristics (Lau and Redlawsk 2006). While heuristics are used most appropriately by the more politically informed (Lau and Redlawsk 2006) when it comes down to vote decision, these shortcuts are still ubiquitous and widespread among voters deciding whom to vote for. Much of the heuristics literature focuses on the effect of heuristic use on vote choice and ignores the effect it may have on a citizen's decision to turn out to vote in the first place. This paper takes a step back from vote choice and seeks to understand if heuristics help people turn out to vote. If voters and nonvoters are different in the ways they prioritize and understand various heuristics, we will gain further understanding of the information barriers blocking certain people from voting.

While work by Schaffner, Streb, and Wright (2001) and Schaffner and Streb (2002) examines the effects that removing partisan labels have on turnout and vote intention for uneducated voters—they conclude that doing so suppresses turnout and makes uneducated voters less confident in linking their preferred candidate to a party—much of the literature on heuristics focuses on their effectiveness on actually making correct candidate decisions. They take turnout as a given, and the population of Americans they are studying have already made the decision to turn out to vote. The aforementioned literature on voter turnout makes it very clear that turnout is not a given. By leaving out nonvoters, these heuristic studies may overlook some of the importance of heuristics—their effectiveness in lowering information barriers that some Americans perceive must be overcome in order to vote. My research is focused on this potential advantage that heuristics offer. Perhaps heuristics allow people to actually make the decision to vote in the first place because they have some information rather than none at all, or they feel that this information is adequate to participate in democracy effectively. Many Americans may be torn between the desire to fulfill their civic duty and vote and their fear of casting an uninformed and irresponsible ballot. The latter norm creates a stigma for low-information potential voters, which may drive them away from the polls on Election Day, but heuristics may be the solution for this as they are low-cost ways to behave as a fully-informed citizen would (Lupia 1994a; Lupia 1994b; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

Heuristic-based Turnout

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My theory is not of voter turnout writ large. It does not answer the question "what makes people vote?" The puzzle that I want to begin to solve is why do some uninformed people vote while others do not? My theory is concerned with the information barriers that keep some potential voters from voting. It is a theory concerned with the conflicting expectations that one should fulfill their civic duty and vote each election, but that it is harmful to a democracy to vote without adequate candidate information. My concern is that the latter standard counteracts the former and results in suppressing voter turnout where it would usually exist. In a democracy where political interest is at an all time low (Prior 2007) but turnout rates have remained relatively stable since the 80's and have even increased over the past two presidential elections (McDonald-United States Election Project), there must be many voters who use heuristics in order to make political decisions less complex (Lau & Redlawsk 1997; Lau & Redlawsk 2001; Lau & Redlawsk 2006). My theory is that people's perceptions of the importance of certain heuristics affect turnout. Nonvoters do not perceive the importance of certain heuristics the same way voters do. They may prioritize less effective shortcuts that offer less information and feel that they are unable to make an effective decision and therefore avoid the voting process altogether.

My research extends the cost-based turnout literature by arguing that some Americans perceive information to be a cost when it comes to voting. This is obvious as public opinion data has shown that Americans believe some people should be excluded from the voting process based on how much information they can acquire about a given election. I argue that heuristics lower information costs and that they

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can allow relatively uninformed Americans to make the decision to vote because they believe they know enough about the election to do so. I predict that this effect will be more prominent among respondents with lower education levels, since they face higher information cost barriers to voting. Since education is known to be a strong predictor of turnout, heuristic perceptions may not make a difference for the turnout rates of the highly educated respondents in our survey. Information is not a cost to them. They are the segment of the population that always votes no matter what, and so their ranking of various heuristics will be irrelevant because heuristics do little to alter the cost of voting for the highly educated.

Heuristics also increase benefits, making it more worthwhile for relatively uninformed voters to turn out. Because these people might now know something about the candidates rather than nothing at all, they may feel like their vote is more effective and important. Again, highly educated respondents probably always feel that their votes are effective and worthwhile, so heuristics do not offer them any new benefits to voting. My research is concerned with explaining turnout as a function of heuristic perceptions and leaves the question of vote choice unanswered because it is primarily concerned with the information barriers that Americans perceive they must overcome in order to vote as a result of the information-based counter-norm, and because there has already been extensive research on vote choice and heuristics.

I predict that respondents who perceive the vote choice of friends and party identification to be the most effective information shortcuts will be more likely to also be voters. This hypothesis is based on the partisan identification literature that

states that party identification is a social and psychological identity that can be passed down through families (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes 1960; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler 2002) and the aforementioned social theory of voter turnout (Rolfe 2012; Sinclair 2012). Even if potential voters are not completely informed about the party platforms and particular issue stances of a given candidate, they probably identify with an inherited political party and understand the social identity that goes along with each one (Green et al. 2002). This may allow them to believe they have enough information to make a vote choice.

As for social heuristics, more politically informed members of certain social networks may provide campaign- and election-related cues, increasing the salience of an election in the minds of less informed citizens in these networks and making them more likely to vote. As many friend and co-worker networks are homogenous, these less informed citizens may believe they can use the cues from these more informed network members to make an efficient vote choice, and therefore turn out to vote when they otherwise may not have because "what people do depends on what the people around them do" (Rolfe 2012 22; Sinclair 2012). The "friends" heuristic is therefore also considered an "effective" heuristic because of how prevalent homogeneity is in social networks and how much information this shortcut can convey about different candidates to potential voters. If a less-informed member of a social network knows which candidate their friend is supporting and that their friend is very similar to them, they may be able to infer that that candidate would be worth casting a vote for.

Conversely, I predict that respondents who prioritize less effective heuristics will not vote. These "less effective" heuristics may include shortcuts that provide relatively little information about what kind of representative or leader a candidate is going to be. With regard to the specific survey question used in this paper, these heuristics would be race, gender, religion, occupation, and endorsement by the local newspaper. For example, respondents may prioritize race or gender as the most important piece of information when deciding whom to vote for, and then have very little information in elections when the entire field is made up of white men. While one may be able to infer leadership skills or legal experience from a candidate's occupation, it is not necessarily a useful decision making aid as many candidates have similar jobs—incumbent politicians, lawyers, business men and women, etc. An ineffective heuristic is therefore a shortcut that offers little information or one that cannot ultimately aid the decision-making process, and I predict that there will be an association between the rankings of these ineffective heuristics and a lack of turnout.

Before testing my hypotheses it is important to consider other variables that may affect both turnout and perceptions of the effectiveness of various heuristics. Education has always been a strong predictor of turnout, and there will most likely be an association between education and the perceived importance of various heuristics in my analysis. More highly educated Americans are usually the ones who are more interested in politics or have more experience voting and therefore can better understand which heuristics will typically be most useful in an election environment. For example, they may understand that the party identification

heuristic is extremely effective in substituting for information they could have learned had they been watching the news and researching the candidates during the entire span of the election. However as was previously mentioned, the rankings of heuristics will matter less for the highly educated because they are more likely to turn out in general. Conversely, less educated Americans may prioritize heuristics that offer much less relevant information in an election and are less useful in making a vote choice. These people may feel that a candidate's race, gender, or religion are the most important decision-making aids available in an election and find themselves unable to decide when both candidates are white Protestant males. Not having much more information than this may deter potential voters because the cost of voting has not been sufficiently lowered and there are still barriers to be crossed. However, when uneducated, low-information respondents perceive effective heuristics to be important, we will likely see an increase in voter turnout in this educational demographic, because of lowered costs and increased benefits.

Partisanship is also a factor that affects turnout and will most likely affect the perceived importance of certain heuristics, for "few factors are of greater importance for our national elections than the lasting attachment of tens of millions of Americans to one of the parties. These loyalties establish a basic division of electoral strength within which the competition of particular campaigns takes place" (Campbell et. al 1960 121). Partisanship is strongly associated with turnout (Campbell et. al 1960; Bartels 2000) as "strong partisans who care about election outcomes are more likely to vote than weak partisans or independents who care less about the results" (Rolfe 2012 1). Partisans may feel more interest, passion, and

conviction about the issues in an election due not only to their party loyalties but also their core beliefs, which are usually inherited through generations (Green et. al 2002). Independents may not turn out in such high numbers because their ideological beliefs may vary depending on different issues, and they are therefore less sure about whom to vote for and may feel that they need to overcome more information barriers in order to vote effectively. When considering voting for a person who usually represents a consistent ideology and party platform, many Independents must do a lot more research than partisans in order to feel like their vote is serving their interests. Their information barriers are higher. Therefore we can imagine that the perceived usefulness of the partisan heuristic will also vary along levels of partisan strength. The party identification heuristic will probably be a vital decision making aid for people who identify as Republicans or Democrats, but will probably be less useful for Independents.

CHAPTER III

DATA AND METHODS

The data necessary to answer the question of the relationship between

various heuristic perceptions and voter turnout comes from a 2012 Cooperative

Congressional Election Study (CCES) survey of 55,400 Americans, on a module

created by the University of Massachusetts Amherst (Ansolabehere & Schaffner

2013) which had 1,000 respondents. YouGov administered the survey through

matched random sampling, in which they selected members of their large opt-in

panels who had matching characteristics (gender, race, age, education, ideology,

party identification, etc.) to each individual selected in a target random sample of

the American adult population. This method is effective because it allows YouGov to

offer a sample population that matches the target population in the American

electorate on key characteristics, which allows us to make inferences that span

beyond the respondents in our survey (Schaffner 2011). The exact phrasing of the

question is as follows:

> "If you had to vote in an election but did not know any of the candidates
> competing, which pieces of information would be most useful for
> helping   you decide who to vote for?"
>
>> Rank in 7 slots
>> - The political party of the candidate
>> - The candidate that was endorsed by the local newspaper
>> - The occupation of each candidate
>> - The gender of each candidate
>> - The race of each candidate
>> - Which candidate your friends support
>> - The religion of each candidate

The options were randomized to prevent respondent bias in the order of the

options. Although the question identifies the options as "pieces of information", it is

important to remember that heuristics are more like information shortcuts that can represent more in-depth information. Heuristics are much more than just "pieces of information" because they are the mechanisms through which people are cognitively able to access and infer deeper information than what each heuristic suggests or offers. Being labeled a Republican is not just a label or simply a form of identification. It means the candidate most likely supports small government, states' rights, and gun rights and promotes the interests of big business while they probably oppose abortion, open borders, and expansion of marriage rights to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community. Many Americans can infer all of this information and more from a simple party label. However, since many respondents would not know the term "heuristics", it was necessary to call the options "pieces of information" in the question.

Although this question offers a clear look at which heuristics respondents perceive are most useful in deciding whom to vote for in an election, one weakness is that we are unable to understand exactly which heuristics were used in the information processing method before each respondent made the decision to vote. Another weakness in this question is that turnout is a given, leading with the phrase "if you had to vote . . ." This forces the respondent to imagine an election-day voting environment and to answer accordingly. However this question is primarily concerned with heuristic perceptions rather than heuristic use, and while each respondent answered as if they were definitely in a voting environment, the survey includes a validated vote measurement, which allowed me to see the turnout distribution among respondents, and turnout certainly was not guaranteed in

reality. We can therefore measure the two variables critical to this question: perceptions of heuristics and voter turnout. So this question, while imperfect, is appropriate to begin to answer the question at hand.

When it came to operationalizing the heuristic ranking variables, the heuristic rankings were already coded within the dataset to be divided by heuristic with indication of how many respondents ranked each heuristic on a usefulness scale of 1-7. Therefore each heuristic became its own shortcut variable in Stata whose codebook would show the distribution of rankings in spots 1-7. I combined both desktop and mobile online responses to get access every respondent's answers within each variable. I ended up with seven heuristic ranking variables: "party identification" shortcut, "friend" shortcut, "job" shortcut, "endorse" shortcut, "race" shortcut, "religion" shortcut, and "gender" shortcut. To create a variable for turnout I coded the validated vote variable so that surveys that "Matched No Vote" and respondents who openly admitted not voting were coded as 0 and those surveys whose votes were validated were coded as 1. Out of 1,000 total module respondents, 983 had validated vote data so 983 became the final sample size. I then ran a logistic regression with turnout as the dependent variable and each shortcut as independent variables. The test was set up this way to understand how changes in the ranking of each heuristic affected the changes in turnout rates. In my model I included controls for race, age, gender, education, partisan strength, party identification, and ideology in order to avoid the risk of getting false or exaggerated findings from a confounding variable I did not include in the model. For example, if I did not include race in the model then coefficients for the ranking of the race

heuristic may have been much higher. It was important to start with a simple

logistic regression model in order to get preliminary findings and understand which

variables show a statistically significant association with turnout. These results are

presented in Table 1 in the Results and Analysis section below.

It was previously discussed that both education and partisan strength affect

turnout and can possibly have an effect on the types of heuristics that respondents

prioritize. In order to account for these possibilities, I ran interaction models

between the party identification heuristic, education, and turnout as well as the

"friendship" heuristic, education, and turnout, with controls for race and partisan

strength. The results are presented in Figure 2, and Figure 3 below and in Table A1

in Appendix A. In order to rule out the possibility of the party identification heuristic

acting as a proxy for partisan strength predicting turnout, I also ran separate logistic

regression models sorting by partisan strength to assess the effect of the party

identification heuristic and the "friend" heuristic ranking on turnout, and these

results are presented in Table 3 below.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Out of the seven heuristics I tested with regard to their effect on voter

turnout, only the party identification and "friendship" heuristics proved to have a

statistically significant effect or marginally significant effect, as shown below in

Table 1. While there were also positive turnout associations with the occupation

heuristic and negative associations with the race, gender, newspaper endorsement,

and religion heuristics as I hypothesized, the results were not statistically or

marginally significant.

Table 1: Estimation Results: Logistic Regression

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Candidate's party identification	.30	.10
Candidate a friend voted for	.17	.09
Candidate endorsed by local newspaper	.09	.09
Candidate's occupation	-.17	.11
Candidate's race	-.04	.12
Candidate's religion	-.03	.09
Race	.04	.11
Age	.02	.01
Education	.15	.08
Partisan strength	.26	.18
Gender	-.14	.22
Ideology	.02	.15
Party identification	-.02	.22
Constant	-2.47	1.26

Table 1. Shows the results of a logistic regression between the dependent variable turnout and the independent variables—the various heuristics. Note: the gender heuristic was automatically omitted from analysis because of collinearity. P-values for the partisan heuristic ranking and friendship heuristic ranking were .005 and .06, respectively. N=983

As for our statistically significant variables: Table 2 below shows the mean

turnout rate for respondents who ranked each heuristic in a given slot from 1-7.

This table provides a clear visual that there is an association between where

respondents rank certain heuristics and their likelihood to turn out to vote. While it

presents the findings for every heuristic included in the survey question it is

important to keep in mind that only the party identification and the "friendship"

heuristics are statistically or marginally significant when controlling for other

factors. Table 2 shows that the party identification heuristic and the "friendship"

heuristic also show substantively significant differences between the turnout rates

of respondents who ranked each heuristic first versus those who ranked them last.

People who rank the partisan identification heuristic as the most useful "piece of

information" (ranked first) they would use if they did not have any other candidate

information are 30% more likely to vote than those who rank the party

identification heuristic as the least useful heuristic (ranked seventh). Respondents

who consider which candidate their friend supports to be the most important "piece

of information" are 25% more likely to vote than those who ranked it the least

important.

Table 2: Mean Turnout According to Each Heuristic Ranking

Ranking	Party identification	Friend	Endorsement	Occupation	Gender	Race	Religion
Ranked 1st	84%	88%	60%	71%	29%	72%	77%
Ranked 2nd	79%	87%	76%	82%	62%	53%	75%
Ranked 3rd	72%	82%	80%	82%	70%	82%	78%
Ranked 4th	56%	76%	74%	87%	82%	75%	88%
Ranked 5th	73%	74%	81%	85%	82%	69%	81%
Ranked 6th	57%	78%	82%	53%	78%	84%	75%
Ranked 7th	53%	63%	88%	87%	83%	80%	76%

Table 2. Shows the mean turnout rate for respondents who rank each heuristic from 1-7. A rank of 1 is high, while a rank of 7 is low. N=983

 With the association between rankings of these heuristics and turnout being such a substantive finding, I decided to look further into how the ranking of these heuristics interacts with another important predictor of turnout: education. While education cannot be used as a proxy for political information or sophistication, scholars have shown that higher levels of education are related to higher levels of voter turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Lassen 2005), so it is worth understanding if there is a relationship between education and ranking of the party identification heuristic. The purpose is to test that more educated people are not the only ones who are able to perceive effective heuristics to be useful, because then heuristic ranking would be a proxy for the effect that education has on turnout. I also tested for interaction effects between turnout, ranking of each heuristic, and news interest, but there were no significant effects for this variable. The relationship between turnout, the party identification heuristic ranking, the friend heuristic, and education can be found in Figures 1 and 2, and the model tables can be found in Appendix A.

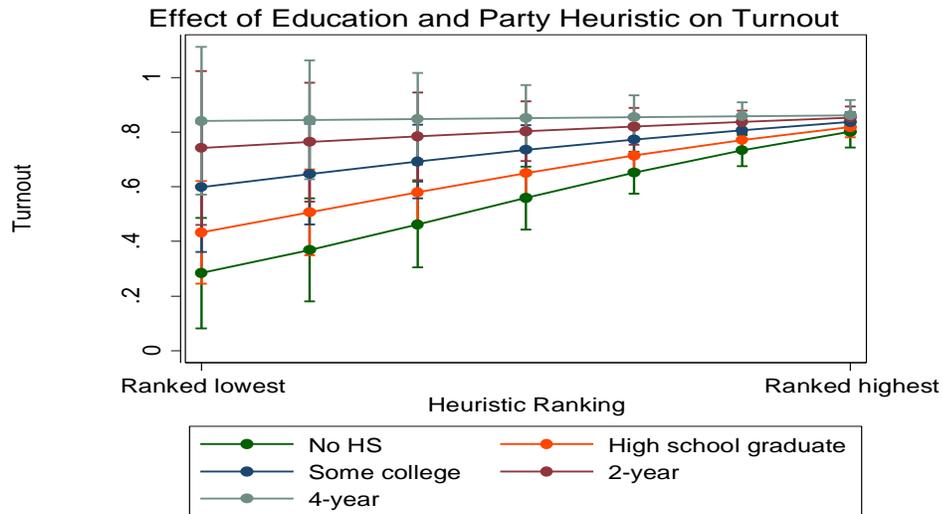Figure 2: Turnout: Party Identification Heuristic Ranking and Education

Figure 2. Shows the relationship between turnout, party identification ranking, and education levels controlling for race, partisan strength, and party identification.

Figure 2 is interesting because it shows the importance of perceptions of the party identification rankings for less educated respondents. According to Figure 2, turnout is pretty steady among respondents with at least a two-year college degree. However, the ranking of the party identification heuristic become much more important as education levels decrease. A person who did not complete high school who perceives the party identification heuristic to be the least useful has around a 30% probability of turning out, while a person with the same level of education who ranks this heuristic the highest has a 80% probability of turning out. Thus heuristics matter more for people with lower levels of education, because people with high levels of education turn out at equal levels regardless of where they rank the partisan identification heuristic. The ranking is not a proxy for the effect of education. We see a similar effect in Figure 3 with regard to the "friendship" heuristic.

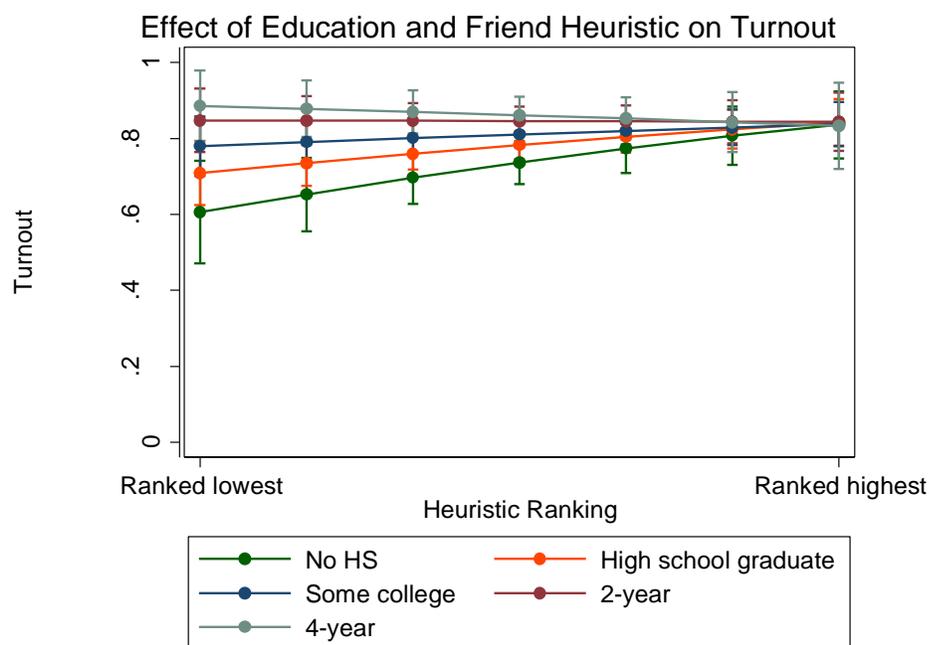Figure 3: Turnout: Friendship Heuristic Ranking and Education

Figure 3. Shows the relationship between turnout, the "friendship" heuristic ranking, and education levels controlling for race, partisan strength, and party identification.

Figures 2 and 3 show the importance of the perceptions or rankings of each heuristic for uneducated respondents. While there are interaction effects between the rankings of each heuristic and the education variable, one is not substituting for the other because the effects of heuristic ranking on voter turnout vary greatly according to education level. Each graph shows that the actual ranking of each heuristic matters most for respondents without a high school diploma. Due to the information-rich nature of the party identification heuristic and the link to homogenous social networks that the "friendship" heuristic offers, these heuristics are highly effective in conveying valuable information about the candidates. If people without a high school diploma perceive these heuristics to be the most important "piece of information" they can find about a candidate, they are almost

just as likely to vote as people with a Bachelor's degree or higher. This finding is important because it reinforces previous studies on heuristics that focused on vote choice and Election Day behavior and took turnout as a given.

As for the role of partisan strength in this question, it is worth noting that the party identification heuristic is only associated with turnout when respondents identified as either a weak or strong partisan. The heuristic was not useful for people who leaned toward one party or who considered themselves Independent. The results of the logistic regression for turnout, the party identification heuristic, and the friendship sorted by strength of partisanship are shown in Table 5 below.

Table 3: Turnout: Party Identification Heuristic Sorted by Partisan Strength

	Independent	Leaner	Weak partisan	Strong partisan
Party identification heuristic	.17 (.14)	.08 (.17)	.40* (.14)	.47* (.13)
Friendship heuristic	.18 (.14)	-.24 (.13)	.42* (.13)	.09 (.09)
Race	.14 (.22)	-.22 (.13)	-.16 (.22)	0.002 (.16)
Education	.38 (.18)	.18 (.14)	.26 (.16)	.02 (.11)
Constant	-2.27 (1.15)	1.50 (1.32)	-3.33 (1.19)	-1.81 (1.00)

Table 3. Shows the impact of the ranking of the party identification heuristic and friendship heuristic on voter turnout according to varying levels of partisan strength. The partisan heuristic p-value for weak partisans is .003, for strong partisans it is less than .001. For the friendship heuristic association with weak partisans, the p-value is .001. This model controls for race and education because they are associated with turnout. Partisan strength was not included as a control in this model because it is included as a sorting mechanism to understand how the data varies across levels of partisan strength.

It was also important to understand how the ranking of the friend heuristic differed across varying levels of partisan strength, in order to understand if some respondents fell back on that heuristic when they no longer perceived that the partisan strength heuristic would be useful. The ranking of the friendship heuristic

is only associated with turnout when respondents identified as weak partisans.

Therefore respondents in the other levels of partisan strength probably value other

heuristics more heavily than the friendship heuristic.

CHAPTER V

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Implications

Party identification and considering the candidate one's friend is supporting are both extremely important and informative heuristics when it comes to increasing turnout among the electorate. When people perceive these heuristics to be the most important "pieces of information" they can use in a voting environment, they are much more likely to vote than if they perceive them to be one of the least important heuristics. However, even the strength of these powerful heuristics cannot fully overcome the importance of education in predicting turnout. At almost every heuristic rank, people who had less education than the level above them were also less likely to turn out (however this is not the case for people without a high school diploma who ranked the "friendship" heuristic as the most important—they actually eclipse the people with a college degree who ranked it similarly). This almost uniform education gap may be because education is also related to income, and the resource model of turnout that relies heavily on SES is still pervasive today, preventing people from taking time off of work to vote or acquiring the resources necessary to completely make up for their lack of education. People who have higher levels of education usually consequently have higher SES, and therefore may be more interested in politics because they have more free time to invest in learning about politics (Prior 2007). If this is the case, it is concerning for the health of American democracy because it likely confirms that representation favors the people who are monetarily able to afford to vote. However, one cannot ignore the

fact that the use of heuristics can help uneducated voters turn out in almost equal numbers to voters with advanced college degrees, in the same way that heuristics help uninformed voters make the same vote choices as more politically informed voters (Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994a; Lupia 1994b; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

Conclusion

This paper focused on the ranking of the party identification and "friendship" heuristics because of their significance in the data analysis and because of their important variations when sorted by education levels. Overall this study has been a win for heuristics. When used properly, they can almost completely even the playing field among voters of various educational backgrounds. Scholars of American politics still have much to learn about the role that heuristics play in voter turnout. Voting as a civic duty has been a normative principle for much of American history, and lack of political information among the electorate has been studied for years, yet the concept of using information shortcuts and decision-making aids with regard to turnout has not been studied. This paper only considers seven heuristics during one election. There are many more heuristics to be considered. Heuristics such as a candidate's leadership qualities, a candidate's education, a candidate's speaking skills, incumbency, and even their looks, are often cited as reasons people vote for certain candidates. Research on these heuristics is in the same state as the research on the heuristics considered in this paper—it concerns vote choice and treats turnout as a given. Future research may look into these heuristics' effect on turnout. It would be interesting for future research to test Americans' information barriers with regards to more varied heuristics, in order to understand more completely just

how much information and what type of information Americans think is necessary

to vote.

APPENDIX

INTERACTION EFFECTS MODEL

Table A.1: Interaction Effects: Turnout, Party Identification Heuristic,

Friend Heuristic, and Education

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Party identification heuristic	.48	.15
Education	.99	.45
Party ID heuristic, education	-.10	.06
Friend heuristic	.27	.13
Friend heuristic, education	-.07	.05
Race	-.02	.10
Partisan strength	.34	.16
Party identification	.24	.18
Constant	-4.21	1.23

Table A1. Shows the interaction effects between education and the ranking of the party identification heuristic or between education and the ranking of the friend heuristic in their effect on turnout. These are the results of a logistic regression model. The p-value for the partisan heuristic was .001, for the friendship heuristic it was .04. The p-values for the interactions between the partisan heuristic and education and the friendship heuristic and education were both .13. N=983

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