

The Social Rewards of Engagement: Appealing to Social Motivations to Stimulate Political Interest at High and Low Levels of External Efficacy

Political Studies

1–18

© The Author(s) 2016

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0032321715619431

psx.sagepub.com**Joshua Robison****Abstract**

Political interest is a crucial precursor to political engagement, but little is known about how to stimulate greater interest. The article explores the role social motives have in generating interest. A laboratory experiment is used in which it is possible to manipulate beliefs about the social rewards of political engagement as well as external efficacy beliefs. Across two types of measures for political interest (self-reports and revealed preferences), connecting political engagement with social rewards led to substantial increases in political interest. Moreover, these effects were particularly strong among individuals with low levels of external efficacy. Ultimately, the data provide clear evidence that political interest can be positively stimulated with social rewards mobilisation techniques and that it is rooted in beliefs about the potential motives pursuable through politics. The paper concludes with a discussion of the broader implications of these results for studies of political participation and mobilisation efforts.

Keywords

political interest, social pressure, political participation, efficacy, mobilisation

Accepted: 13 October 2015

Nearly all conceptions of democracy centre on the participation and preferences of citizens (e.g. Dahl, 1971; Schattschneider, 1960). The importance of participation for both normative and empirical accounts of democratic functioning has inspired numerous explorations concerning the origins of citizen engagement (Campbell, 2006; Campbell et al., 1960; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995; Zukin et al., 2006). This

Aarhus University, Denmark**Corresponding author:**

Joshua Robison, Department of Political Science and Government, Aarhus University, Bartholins Alle 7, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark.

Email: jrobison@ps.au.dk

research highlights the role played both by contextual factors such as mobilisation campaigns (Gerber and Green, 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993) and dispositional factors such as skills and resources (Verba et al., 1995). The focus in this study is one of the most important dispositional factors identified by prior research: political interest. Interested citizens are substantially more likely than their disinterested peers to possess knowledge about politics, vote in elections, and perform a wide variety of other political behaviours (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Milbrath and Goel, 1977; Verba et al., 1995; Zukin et al., 2006). While situational factors play an important role in augmenting the probability with which such outcomes occur, interest plays a critical role in affecting a person's baseline likelihood of engaging with politics. For this reason, understanding the origins of political interest is a critical task for political scientists concerned with explaining citizen engagement.

Political interest has long played a key role in explaining citizen engagement, which raises the interconnected questions of why citizens differ in their interest levels and how greater interest could be stimulated. However, as Markus Prior (2010) notes, political scientists 'do not understand where political interest comes from and could thus not recommend how to increase it' (p. 747). I will argue that political interest is a judgement concerning the likely outcomes of engagement with politics, with interest developing in a positive direction when individuals connect engagement with valued goals. In demonstrating the validity of this proposition, I take a page from recent work concerning social motivations and voting (Gerber et al., 2008, 2010; Panagopoulos, 2010, 2013b; Sinclair, 2012). In particular, I argue that interventions that lead individuals to believe that political engagement is useful for generating and maintaining social relationships will lead individuals to subsequently report greater political interest. Such interventions, in other words, not only directly affect the probability with which a person votes, for instance, but may also make it more likely that they will come to internalise a motivation to do so in the future. I provide evidence consistent with this argument using data from a laboratory experiment in which beliefs about the social rewards of political engagement were manipulated. The results thus shed light on an important, but not fully understood, concept in the political behaviour literature.

A second contribution of the present study concerns a potential moderating influence: external efficacy. Much of the work on social motivations and engagement has used field experiments where explorations of potential moderating influences are difficult to carry out. Here, it is possible to manipulate external efficacy beliefs experimentally, in both a positive and negative direction, alongside beliefs about the social benefits of engagement. Importantly, I show that connecting political engagement to social rewards appears to be particularly effective at stimulating interest among individuals with low levels of external efficacy while appearing to have little additive effect for those with high levels of efficacy. This suggests that connecting politics with social rewards may not only stimulate greater engagement but also mitigate existing inequities in participation.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it provides a definition of political interest and builds the argument that connecting engagement with the satisfaction of valued goals, and social motives in particular, should stimulate greater political interest. It then discusses how such interventions may work across varying levels of external efficacy. I then proceed to describe the study and present the analyses before concluding with a discussion of both the implications and limitations of the present study for understanding political interest and behaviour.

Understanding Political Interest

While political interest has long played a role in predicting participation, studies explicitly focused on explaining interest are rarer. Existing studies have principally focused on the role played by demographic variables and socialisation experiences in moulding citizen skills and resources (Denny and Doyle, 2008; Fitzgerald and Curtis, 2012; Prior, 2010; Shani, 2009). However, such accounts often do not provide a conceptual theory regarding what interest is beyond a simple description of it being motivational in nature, meaning that existing work does not provide great clarity regarding how it is likely to develop and why it changes. It is therefore imperative to first define the concept to gain some purchase on the broader question of its origins and stimulation. On this front, it seems that Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) captured something fundamental about interest when they write:

being interested is a clearly recognizable experience, as anyone knows who has ever been unable to put down a detective story or been bored to tears at a cocktail party. Given any two activities, we can frequently tell at once which is the more interesting for us (p. 41).

In this account, political interest is a judgement concerning the desirability of an activity (or domain of activities). It is, in other words, an *attitude* regarding political engagement. As such, I argue that interest can be understood through the lens of psychological research on the formation and nature of attitudes and their relationship to behaviour.

Specifically, I suggest thinking about political interest through the lens of an expectancy-value model (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010). Under this line of thinking, political interest is an automatically generated attitude towards engagement with politics that is predicated on valenced beliefs regarding the outcomes of engagement and their likelihood of occurring.¹ Interested citizens have come to associate engagement with the realisation of valued outcomes through prior direct and vicarious experiences with politics. Over time, these beliefs will tend to grow stronger (i.e. more certain) and thus the individual's resulting level of interest should stabilise, an expectation supported by panel data (Prior, 2010; Shani, 2009). This manner of understanding interest adds something important to the existing literature: a focus on an individual's goals and how they align with perceptions of politics to create a sense of value. Existing accounts, as noted above, are principally focused on cost or expectancy and have largely elided the question of perceived value.

The foregoing discussion has a key empirical implication: to change interest, one must change a person's beliefs about the likely outcomes of political engagement. Testing this implication requires identifying relevant outcome beliefs to target via intervention. Recent field experimental studies concerning voter turnout suggest a potentially powerful target: the perception that political engagement has *social rewards* (Davenport et al., 2010; Gerber et al., 2008, 2010; Nickerson, 2008; Panagopoulos, 2010, 2014a, 2014b; Panagopoulos et al., 2014; Sinclair, 2012).² These studies have focused on both positive and negative social motivations. Individuals animated by a positive social motivation perform an action, such as voting in an election, to generate rewards from network members such as status, honour, pride and friendship (Addonizio et al., 2007; Panagopoulos, 2010, 2014a). On the other hand, various studies have focused on the negative side of social motivations wherein individuals are motivated to vote, for instance, so as to *avoid* punishment from their friends and family. Here, the key mechanism is social pressure,

either explicitly or implicitly communicated, from one's peers to act in accordance with social norms (Gerber et al., 2008; Panagopoulos, 2014a; Sinclair, 2012). This literature provides a strong demonstration that social motivations can be appealed to in order to motivate voter turnout.³

Existing field experimental studies of the motivating influence of social motivations have principally focused on voter turnout and so we may question whether such motives can also lead to changes in political interest. Perhaps individuals can be prompted to turn out to receive a reward, or avoid social punishment, but will fail to internalise a long-term motivation to continue performing the action (see, for instance, Panagopoulos, 2013a on the relationship between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations). It is likely that internalisation may in fact occur. I focus particularly on the positive motivations identified above and, specifically, the goal of social bonding and esteem.⁴ Recall that I have argued that interest is based on one's perceptions of the outcomes of engagement. When an individual comes to associate engagement with positively evaluated goals, then they will likely form a positive attitude towards, or interest in, performing the activity in the future. This type of social motivation is likely to be positively evaluated and considered important by many citizens regardless of their specific political views, given that humans appear to have a basic need for social attachment and esteem, which motivates them to act to maintain already existing valued relationships and in ways to form new ones (Baumeister and Lear, 1995; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Information that leads individuals to believe that political engagement could serve this motivation should prompt a more positive evaluation of political engagement such that interest will increase. The first hypothesis is thus as follows:

H1. Information leading to the perception that politics has the social rewards of social bonding and esteem will lead to higher political interest (all else equal).

Social Rewards at Low and High Levels of External Political Efficacy

Voter mobilisation efforts that appeal to the social rewards of engagement powerfully stimulate turnout and, I suggest, should do the same for political interest. In other words, individuals will also *internalise* a motivation for engagement due to such an intervention provided they accept the underlying message about the outcomes of engagement. However, it is also important to consider whether such changes, to the extent that they occur, vary in magnitude across population subgroups. In particular, the concern is with whether interventions aimed at stimulating political interest *exacerbate* inequalities in interest by making those individuals predisposed to report being interested *more* interested while having no, or little, influence among those predisposed to report a lack of interest. This concern has been raised in the voter mobilisation literature by Enos et al. (2014) who find that mobilisation campaigns sometimes prompt greater turnout principally among high propensity voters, thereby aggravating turnout gaps. A similar outcome may occur vis-à-vis interest insofar as individuals are motivated to square incoming information with their prior beliefs (as in Lodge and Taber, 2006). For instance, if individuals already likely to report an interest in politics are more likely to accept positive and interest-supporting information than those predisposed in the other direction, then it is possible we would see the same type of exacerbation effect demonstrated by Enos et al. In such a case, we would still see evidence in confirmation of the broader theory

regarding the nature of political interest, but would nevertheless have a reason for pause due to the normatively worrying implications of such a moderated effect of the intervention.

Prior field experimental studies have focused on the differential effects of social motive interventions on high and low propensity voters (Enos et al., 2014; Gerber and Rogers, 2009; Panagopoulos, 2010, 2014a). In the present study, I focus on the potential moderating influence of external efficacy, which refers to beliefs concerning the responsiveness of the government. I focus on external efficacy for two inter-related reasons. First, it should be a plausible, if imperfect, proxy for one's propensity to vote, and propensity to be interested in politics, given the positive relationship between these outcomes in prior studies (Bennett, 1986; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). With regard to interest, this empirical relationship can be understood in light of the conceptual argument regarding interest advanced earlier. Recall the argument that interest is predicated on beliefs about the likely outcomes of engagement; thus, efficacious citizens should be more interested in politics insofar as they believe that their political activity is more likely to lead to positive outcomes due to the positive nature of government responsiveness. Second, the focus is on external efficacy in order to independently manipulate these beliefs (and hence propensity to be interested) so as to provide some additional confidence in the claims about the effects of social benefits at varying levels of efficacy. External efficacy is perhaps a more plausible target of intervention than internal or general self-efficacy beliefs, as changing these beliefs involves affecting the beliefs a person holds about their self-identity (i.e. beliefs individuals are likely to be quite motivated to maintain). Voter propensity scores, meanwhile, are based on actual past behaviour which is not quite amenable to experimental change. External efficacy is not the only component of efficacy that matters for interest and engagement, but it is perhaps the best target for our purposes.

The following two hypotheses are postulated. First, observational studies and theoretical reasoning suggest that external efficacy is positively associated with political interest. This implies that experimentally inducing a change in efficacy levels, by itself, in a positive or negative direction, will have a concomitant change on interest (e.g. positive or negative). Second, connecting political engagement with social rewards is expected to exert a positive influence on interest at both (experimentally induced) high and low levels of external efficacy. The nature of the social motivation under exploration here – that is, forming and maintaining social relationships – should be highly valued by individuals regardless of their external efficacy levels. Indeed, this type of motivation should be nearly universally valued. This, in turn, suggests that individuals at both ends of the efficacy spectrum should be responsive to this intervention. This supposition also appears to be consistent with some prior explorations of heterogeneity in response to social motives in field experiments, which have found similar reactions by both high and low propensity voters (Gerber and Rogers, 2009; Panagopoulos, 2010, 2013b).

H2. Changing external efficacy beliefs in a positive direction will lead to higher political interest, while changing them in a negative direction will lead to lower interest (all else equal).

H3. Information leading to the perception that politics has the social rewards of social bonding and esteem will lead to higher interest among both low and high external efficacy individuals (all else equal).

Table 1. Expectations, Interest Reports, Social Benefits and External Efficacy Beliefs.

Outcome:	Treatment Conditions					
	(1) Control	(2) Social Benefits	(3) High Efficacy	(4) Low Efficacy	(5) High Eff. & Social Benefits	(6) Low Eff. & Social Benefits
Expectations	Baseline	Interest: + S. Ben: + E. Eff: N.S.	Interest: + Soc. Ben: N.S. E. Eff.: +	Interest: - Soc. Ben.: N.S. Ext. Eff.: -	Interest: + Soc. Ben.: + Ext. Eff.: +	Interest: + Soc. Ben.: + Ext. Eff.: -
Nat. Interest	0.51 (0.18)	0.72 (0.20)	0.73 (0.24)	0.42 (0.32)	0.79 (0.22)	0.66 (0.23)
ATE:		0.21**	0.23**	-0.09*	0.28**	0.15**
Local Interest	0.40 (0.40)	0.54 (0.23)	0.60 (0.27)	0.29 (0.29)	0.61 (0.32)	0.41 (0.23)
ATE:		0.14*	0.20**	-0.11*	0.21**	0.02
Voting Info	21.43%	41.86%	40.45%	7.14%	57.14%	20.45%
ATE:		0.20*	0.19*	-0.14	0.36**	-0.01
Pol. Clubs Info	16.67%	34.88%	39.02%	7.32%	47.62%	36.36%
ATE:		0.18*	0.22*	-0.09	0.31**	0.20*
Soc. Benefits	0.48 (0.18)	0.65 (0.14)	0.53 (0.20)	0.51 (0.15)	0.70 (0.17)	0.63 (0.15)
ATE:		0.17**	0.05	0.04	0.22**	0.16**
Ext. Efficacy	0.47 (0.19)	0.42 (0.25)	0.63** (0.24)	0.31** (0.19)	0.76** (0.24)	0.30** (0.23)
ATE:		-0.04	0.17**	-0.15**	0.30**	-0.16**
Max N	42	44	43	42	42	42

OLS: ordinary least squares.

Expectations relative to control. Standard deviation is in parentheses. Interest, efficacy and social benefits are scaled 0–1 where higher values equal more positive values. ATE derived from OLS regression (see Table S3c in the Supplementary Information).

+Sig at $p < 0.10$; *Sig. at $p < 0.05$; **Sig at $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed tests).

Study Design

Study Procedure and Treatment Conditions

The data for this project stem from a laboratory experiment conducted in the late winter/early spring of 2012. A 3×2 factorial design was used with study participants randomly assigned across the six resulting groups. A breakdown of the experimental conditions and expectations for each is provided in Table 1. Participants assigned to condition 1 read non-political entertainment articles and thus serve as a control/baseline condition. Participants assigned to condition 2 read treatment materials that primed positive beliefs regarding the social benefits of political activity, while those assigned to conditions 3 and 4 read treatment materials designed to generate either high (condition 3) or low (condition 4) feelings of external efficacy. Finally, those assigned to conditions 5 and 6 read a combination of the social benefits and efficacy treatment materials (i.e. condition 5 received the social benefits and high-efficacy materials). We can thus compare the effects of the social benefits materials at high and low efficacy levels by comparing interest reports made by those in conditions 5 and 6 with those reported in conditions 3 and 4.

All participants were presented with the same task of reading a series of short articles. The core difference between conditions concerned the substantive content of these materials. While participants assigned to the control condition read non-political articles, those in the treatment conditions read politically themed articles designed to affect social benefits and/or efficacy beliefs. Participants in a treatment condition read six articles in total with each belief manipulation involving three short articles (e.g. participants in the pro

efficacy/social benefits condition read three external efficacy treatment and three social benefit articles while participants in the social benefits condition read the same three social benefit articles and three non-political articles). All articles were identified as coming from a recent edition of the *New York Times Magazine* to maximise mundane realism while edited versions of actual journalistic articles were used to maximise experimental realism (McDermott, 2011).

The first article read by participants was attributed to a fictional professor of political science at another university and briefly discussed the research literature concerning the responsiveness of the government to public opinion and/or the social rewards of political activity. Participants then read edited versions of real journalistic articles, which focused on 'real-life' analogues to this purported research literature. For instance, subjects assigned to the high-efficacy conditions read about the successful efforts of citizens using online pressure to combat the Stop-Online Piracy Act legislation while subjects in the low efficacy conditions read about the disconnect between public opinion and policy on issues of marijuana reform (i.e. a lack of governmental responsiveness to public input). Different topics were used for the articles to maintain the mundane realism of the treatment. A description of treatment materials is provided in the online Supplementary Information; the full text of each article is presented in Supplementary Appendix S4.

Sample

All participants were students from a large university in the Midwestern United States, were enrolled in political science courses, and participated to fulfil a class requirement; the total N for the study was 255.⁵ While all participants were enrolled in a political science class, these classes included general course requirements for the university and thus the resulting subject pool is comprised of a majority of non-political science majors. The sample is fairly heterogeneous on demographic variables, although representative of the university from which the sample was drawn. The majority of participants were white (60%), with a smaller number of Asian (16%), African American (9%), Hispanic (9%), and Other Race (6%) participants. Nearly 70% of respondents identified with the Democratic Party. Finally, more women participated than men (57% female). The inclusion of a gender variable or a variable for the other demographic variables into the models below has no substantive effect on the conclusions of the study.⁶ I will discuss the implications that the composition of the sample has for interpreting the implications of the study in the conclusion.

Measures

Political interest was measured on the post-test in two distinct ways. First, interest was measured via two self-report questions, one asking about interest in national politics and the other concerning local politics; all question wordings can be found in Supplementary Appendix S1. Both questions were ordered from 1 ('none at all') to 5 ('a great deal' of interest). Participants recorded greater national interest (mean=3.55) than local interest (mean=2.89) and the two items are only moderately correlated ($corr=0.36$). The data also include two information choice questions to measure political interest as a revealed preference. First, subjects were asked whether they would like to receive information via email about registering to vote or, if already registered, absentee voting procedures. The inclusion of this latter element was intended to target students who might already be

registered to vote. Participants were also asked whether they would like to receive information via email concerning political clubs on campus.⁷ Respondents are coded as equaling one if they opted to receive the information in question.

Participants were asked on the post-test about their external efficacy and social benefits beliefs in order to test whether the treatment materials influenced these constructs. External efficacy was measured with the two standard questions used by the American National Election Studies to measure efficacy. The first asked respondents whether they thought that people like them had a say in what government does, while the second asked whether they thought that 'public officials care much what people like me think'. Responses were coded so that high responses reflect positive levels of efficacy. The two items were combined into an index by taking the average of responses ($corr=0.51$).

Participants' perceptions of the social benefits of political activity were measured via four questions. The questions asked respondents how strongly they agreed/disagreed that political engagement facilitated getting to know more people, connecting with others, bringing influence among friends/family, and bringing respect among friends/family. A factor analysis of these four items revealed only a single dimension with an eigenvalue over 1, with all four items loading on this dimension. I use a variable formed from the average of participants' responses to these four items ($\alpha=0.65$), although using the individual questions would not change the substantive conclusions reached below (see Supplementary Appendix S3).

Analyses

The analyses are structured as follows. They begin with a manipulation check focused on whether the treatments led to differences in social benefits and external efficacy beliefs as expected. Hypotheses 1 and 2 are examined by comparing interest levels across four conditions: the Control, Social Benefits, High Efficacy and Low Efficacy conditions. Hypothesis 3 is then explored, along with the question of whether the social benefit treatments had differential effects at varying levels of efficacy. Here, I proceed by regressing the interest variables on variables for the treatment condition; in doing so, results are provided from models that both omit and include covariates.

Manipulation Check

Table 1 provides group means for the social benefits and external efficacy variables and clearly shows that the treatments had the expected effect on these variables. Efficacy levels are significantly higher among those in the High Efficacy treatment conditions, and lower in the Low Efficacy conditions, than for those in the Control and non-efficacy treatment groups. Meanwhile, there is significantly greater agreement that politics serves social ends among those in the Social Benefits conditions than in the Control and non-social benefits treatment conditions. Importantly, treatment groups that received the same treatment do not differ in terms of the targeted belief variable. In other words, participants in the Low Efficacy/Social Benefits condition do not significantly differ in terms of their external efficacy from those assigned to the Low Efficacy condition, although the two do significantly differ in terms of their beliefs about the social benefits of engagement. The same pattern emerges when comparing the High Efficacy/Social Benefits and High Efficacy pairing. These results provide a point of leverage for assessing the effects of social motivations at both high and low levels of external efficacy.⁸

Political Interest: Examining H1 and H2 with Self-Reports and Information Choices

In H1, it was argued that a social benefits treatment would lead to heightened political interest and Table 1 contains condition means and estimates of average treatment effects and provides initial support for this hypothesis. While the mean level of national and local interest for the control group was 3.02 and 2.60, respectively, the social benefits condition reported means of 3.88 and 3.16. These differences are substantially and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$). There is also evidence of treatment effects when we consider the two information choice measures. Only 21.43% and 16.67% of individuals in the control group selected the registration/absentee voting and political clubs information, respectively. As Table 1 shows, assignment to the social benefits treatment condition is associated with a near doubling of both figures (41.86% and 34.88%). This is evidence of a substantial treatment effect. These results are supportive of Hypothesis 1 and suggest the powerful influence which appealing to social motivations can have on reports of political interest.

Meanwhile, in H2, it was argued that a high (low) efficacy treatment would lead to more (less) interest. Table 1 also provides empirical support for Hypothesis 2 and particularly for the High Efficacy component of the hypothesis. Individuals in the High Efficacy condition report substantially higher levels of national interest (3.93) and local interest (3.38) than those in the control (both differences significant at $p < 0.01$). The proportion of individuals in this condition selecting the registration/absentee voting (40.48%) and clubs information options (39.02%) is also substantially and statistically greater than what is found in the control group ($p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.06$, respectively). Meanwhile, the inverse patterns emerge when comparing the Low Efficacy and Control conditions, as expected. The mean interest reports among those in the Low Efficacy condition are 2.68 (National Interest), 2.14 (Local Interest), 7.14% (Registration/Absentee Voting Info) and 7.31% (Political Clubs Info). These figures represent a potentially substantial difference in interest reports. However, only two of these comparisons are statistically significant and here only at the less conventional $p < 0.10$ standard.⁹ Part of the reason for this lack of statistical significance may lie in the greater level of variance in interest reports in the Low Efficacy condition, particularly on the national interest measure. Including covariates to these analyses, as done in Table 2 later on and in analyses reported in Supplementary Appendix S3, does appear to increase the precision of the estimates with greater evidence of significant treatment effects emerging. Ultimately, then, there is clear evidence in favour of H2 with regard to the High Efficacy condition and a clear and supportive, albeit uncertain, pattern with regard to the Low Efficacy treatment.

Examining H3 with Regression Analyses

In Hypothesis 3, it was argued that the social benefits treatment would have a similar effect among both those with high and those with low external efficacy. Some initial, and disconfirmatory, evidence on this front can be gleaned from Table 1. Participants in the High Efficacy and Social Benefits condition not only report significantly greater levels of interest (regardless of measure) than those in the Control, they also tend to report the *highest* levels of interest across conditions. However, a comparison of the means between the High Efficacy/Social Benefits and High Efficacy treatment groups suggests that the doubling of treatments had little additive effect. Indeed, none of these four comparisons

Table 2. Did the Social Benefits Treatment Work Differently by Efficacy Condition?

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	National Interest	National Interest	Local Interest	Local Interest	Voting Info	Voting Info	Pol. Clubs Info	Pol. Clubs Info
Social Benefits	0.236** (0.0554)	0.284** (0.0609)	0.129* (0.0603)	0.185** (0.0655)	1.207+ (0.706)	0.980 (0.742)	1.979** (0.677)	1.554* (0.749)
High Efficacy	0.311** (0.0557)	0.329** (0.0606)	0.310** (0.0610)	0.325** (0.0652)	2.179** (0.677)	2.323** (0.726)	2.093** (0.680)	2.259** (0.794)
SB * HE	-0.183* (0.0783)	-0.228** (0.0833)	-0.117 (0.0857)	-0.144 (0.0897)	-0.533 (0.833)	-0.466 (0.888)	-1.628* (0.810)	-1.596+ (0.932)
Constant	0.421** (0.0396)	0.425** (0.102)	0.286** (0.0431)	0.310** (0.111)	-2.565** (0.599)	-4.254** (1.147)	-2.539** (0.600)	-5.299** (1.231)
Observations	168	163	170	165	170	165	168	153
Adjusted R ²	0.219	0.233	0.174	0.209				
Pseudo R ²					0.146	0.223	0.096	0.234
Covariates?	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

OLS: ordinary least squares.

Interest models are OLS regressions, information models are logit regressions. DVs range from 0–1 (National and Local Interest) or are dichotomous (both info measures). Standard errors are in parentheses; significance tests are two-tailed.

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

is statistically significant. This can be contrasted with the results from a comparison of the Low Efficacy/Social Benefits and Low Efficacy conditions. First, we can note that individuals assigned to the former condition tend to report interest levels either no different from the Control (Local Interest, Voting Info measures) or significantly greater (National Interest, Political Clubs Info measures). This suggests that the positive influence of the social benefits treatment is off-setting and potentially overriding the negative influence of the low efficacy treatment given the latter's trend towards negatively affecting interest. Meanwhile, difference of means tests (for the two interest measures) and difference of proportion tests (for the two information measures) show that the Low Efficacy/Social Benefits treatment group reports significantly higher interest than the Low Efficacy group.¹⁰ This suggests that H3 is not supported and that, if anything, the influence of the social benefits treatment was greater in the Low Efficacy case than in the High Efficacy group. If so, then this would mean that far from maintaining or exacerbating inequities in interest, such interventions might reduce them.

While the preceding analyses provide some suggestive evidence that the effects of the social benefits treatment were greater in the Low Efficacy than the High Efficacy treatment condition, the most appropriate test for this comparison comes from regression models wherein interest is regressed on treatment indicators (Social Benefits: Yes vs. no; Efficacy: High vs. Low) and their interaction.¹¹ The results for all four interest dependent variables are provided in Table 1. Note that Table 1 includes results from two models per dependent variable: one where covariates are omitted and one where covariates are included.¹² Two figures further clarify the interaction effects. Figure 1 plots the marginal effect of assignment to the social benefits treatment by efficacy condition while Figure 2 plots the predicted value of the dependent variable for the four experimental groups holding covariates at their mean level.

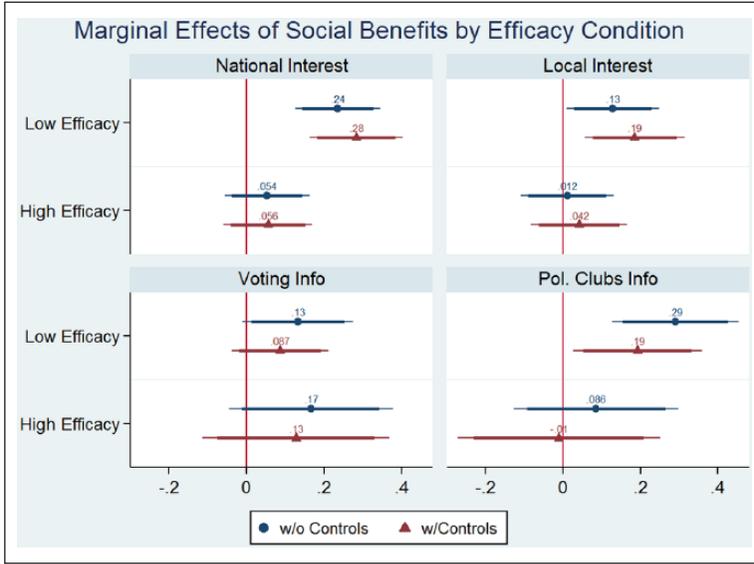


Figure 1. Marginal Effect of Social Benefits Treatment by Efficacy condition. Markers provide the marginal effect of assignment to the social benefits condition by efficacy group assignment (y-axis); circle markers provide results from models without covariates, triangular markers provide results from models with covariates. Both 95% and 90% confidence intervals are provided for the estimates.

Beginning with Table 2, we note the following results. First, the coefficient for High Efficacy indicates the emergence of a significant and quite substantial cleavage in interest between those assigned to the High Efficacy and those assigned to the Low Efficacy condition (among those not assigned to receive the social benefits treatment; Brambor et al., 2006). Individuals in the former case are substantially more interested in politics across all measures. Second, the Social Benefits coefficient indicates a consistent pattern wherein reception of this treatment led to a significant increase in interest among those individuals who also received the Low Efficacy treatment. Finally, the interaction terms suggest some support for the claim that the effects of the social benefits treatment were greater among those assigned to the Low Efficacy condition than among those assigned to the High Efficacy condition. This effect emerges on the National Interest and Political Clubs measures with effects significant at the $p < 0.05$ mark in three of the four models and at the $p < 0.10$ mark for the fourth. However, while the interaction coefficient is negative for the other two measures, in neither case is this effect statistically significant. As Figure 1 shows, the marginal effects of assignment to the Social Benefits condition is over three times as great in the Low than High Efficacy group on the local interest measure (i.e. 0.19 vs. 0.042 on the covariate-adjusted local interest graph) albeit with sufficient variance on the two estimates to prevent us from being able to confidently assert statistical significance. Thus, we must be careful with our interpretation of H3; while there is some evidence suggesting differential effects by efficacy level (and thus a narrowing of interest gaps rather than their exacerbation), the Local Interest and Voting Information measures suggest that it cannot be claimed with certainty that the effect was significantly greater among those with Low rather than High Efficacy. In other words, two of the tests go against H3 and two of them support it.

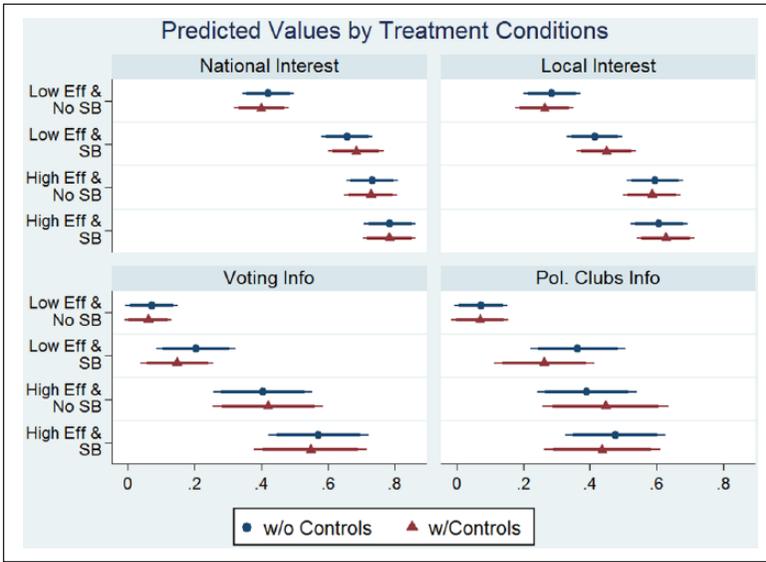


Figure 2. Predicted Values by Treatment Conditions.

Markers provide either the expected value on the 0–1 interest variable or the predicted probability of a respondent selecting the information options by treatment condition. 95% and 90% confidence intervals are also provided.

While it is not possible to say with certainty that the effect of the social benefits treatment among those in the Low Efficacy condition was significantly greater than it was among those in the High Efficacy condition, these results do suggest that the effect was *only* significant in the former case as indicated by the difference of means analyses and Figure 1. Why did we not see a significant effect among the High Efficacy group? Figure 2 provides some suggestive evidence on this front. First, on the national interest, and to a lesser extent the local interest measure, the experiment may have run into some ceiling effects. Note that the marginal values among those in the High Efficacy only grouping (i.e. High Efficacy and No Social Benefits) are quite high, and while there is some evidence of a further shift to the right among those in the High Efficacy and Social Benefits condition, particularly on the national interest measure, this effect can only go so far given the high starting point. Second, on the information measures, and particularly the voting measure, we do see a shift to the right in the predicted probability of selecting this information source; the failure to find a significant effect here is being driven by the wide confidence intervals for the estimates. Ultimately, these results provide suggestive evidence that the Social Benefits treatment was most effective among those in the Low Efficacy condition, although as noted, this supposition has a good deal of associated uncertainty.

Conclusion

Political interest has played a key role in explanations of political knowledge and behaviour for over half a century. However, political scientists still do not fully understand this concept, particularly where it comes from and how it may be changed. In this study, I have provided a theory of political interest rooted in psychological models of attitude

formation. In particular, I have shown that political interest, at least among the sample and in this particular setting, is responsive to information that fosters a change in belief regarding the likely outcomes of engagement with politics. Individuals exposed to information connecting political engagement with positive social rewards reported substantially greater political interest across two distinct types of measures of interest. Moreover, this effect consistently occurred among individuals with low levels of experimentally induced external efficacy, that is, among individuals who, absent the social benefits treatment, would have ended up reporting low levels of interest as well. This effect suggests that information identifying a potential motive for engagement can potentially serve as an effective mobilisation tool for individuals predisposed to opt out of politics, although the evidence is not fully conclusive on whether such mobilisation attempts would narrow interest gaps or merely maintain them. In the remainder of this conclusion, I wish to discuss the potential limitations of the study and end by discussing the implications of the study for the broader question of how political interest develops and changes and also pay attention to some potential limitations of the study.

The evidence presented supports the general claim that political interest is responsive to information about the potential rewards of political engagement. However, this is a single study with a specific sample in a particular setting and so obviously one must be careful in ascribing too much generalisability to these results (McDermott, 2011). Here, I would like to note three elements of the study that warrant some caution. First, the information choice measure of interest was intended as a slightly harder test of treatment effects than the self-reports, insofar as indicating that one desires more information about a subject entails a greater commitment than simply reporting one's interest on a self-report. However, it is nevertheless the case that such reports are only a soft proxy for a change in interest. In other words, the difficulty involved is weaker than if the studies had included a more time-consuming or otherwise costly endeavour. The significant treatment effects may thus represent maximal effects. Second, the conditions vary both in terms of content and also in the number of treatment articles read (i.e. 6 in the mixture, 3 otherwise). One possibility is that it was the number, rather than the content, driving the results in the mixture conditions. I do not believe this is what occurred given the failure to find significant differences between the Social Benefits (3 articles) and High Efficacy/Social Benefits (6 articles) conditions.

Third, the broader implications one can draw from an empirical study are intimately related to the sample from which one's evidence is generated. The sample in this experiment has two specific characteristics that might matter: its youth and its focus on students. The age range of the sample does have implications for the specific types of generalisations that one might wish to draw. For instance, it seems plausible that we would have witnessed weaker treatment effects among an older sample given that political interest crystallises in young adulthood (i.e. in one's early to mid 20s; Prior, 2010). However, one can make a few points on this front. First, recent empirical work suggests that student samples are not *necessarily* problematic in terms of generalising to broader populations (Druckman and Kam, 2011; Mullinix et al., forthcoming). Second, given that our broader goal is understanding the development, and hence changes over time, of political interest, the fact that interest crystallises implies that a sample with this age frame is actually the most appropriate one for investigating the hypotheses. Replicating these results with samples with greater heterogeneity in terms of age would certainly contribute to our knowledge concerning political interest, but nevertheless I do not believe that the age of the sample members is overly problematic.

Of course, this sample does differ in marked ways from youths in general, which may raise the fear that this sample is biased in ways that favour confirmation of hypotheses. For instance, the university in question draws upon a fairly affluent student population. And, of course, the sample involves students, which may raise questions about how non-students react. However, it is unclear why that would make either stimulus more likely to generate confirmatory results. As noted, social motivations are not unique to this sample and have been profitably used on general population samples previously. Characteristics of the university could plausibly lead to a sample that begins the experiment with higher external efficacy than students at other universities, or non-students, but this would suggest that the positive efficacy prime would be weaker due to the higher starting values (i.e. a ceiling effect). While the full testing of a causal theory requires multiple tests in myriad settings for validity to be truly established (Druckman and Kam, 2011), this sample does not appear to be systematically biased in favour of confirmatory effects.

In the present study, I have focused on social rewards and how they may be appealed to in order to generate greater interest. However, social rewards are clearly not the only potential motive that could be appealed to in this manner. Lazarsfeld et al. (1968), for instance, highlight cognitive stimulation and the affective response of excitement in the quotation provided earlier (also see Kam, 2012 on sensation seeking and behaviour). Verba et al.'s (1995: ch. 4) survey results concerning the motives of politically active citizens suggests the potential influence of material, civic and policy gratifications as well (Miller, 2013). The theory for this experiment holds that information and experiences that lead individuals to update their beliefs about the connection between political engagement and these other goals, and particularly fosters the belief that politics is instrumental to their realisation, would likewise lead to positive changes in interest. Ultimately, the experiment focused on social rewards for a few key reasons. First, by doing so, it was possible to build upon, and contribute to, a broader literature concerning the role of social motives in generating voter turnout (Gerber et al., 2008; Gerber and Rogers, 2009; Panagopoulos, 2013b; Sinclair, 2012). Second, it was also felt that social motives were an especially good test for the theory. On the one hand, targeting the social motives considered here may simply be easier to carry out than interventions targeting other goals. While individuals vary in terms of their extraversion, a need for human attachment nevertheless appears to be a universal human condition (Baumeister and Lear, 1995). On the other hand, individuals clearly differ in terms of their *particular* material self-interests; targeting this belief would thus require identifying a variety of interests and micro-targeting them appropriately. A similar point can be made about the goal of value- or identity-expression. While successfully targeting these goals would also lead to similar changes in political interest, social rewards appear to stand out as the most efficient target available.

Hence, this discussion highlights the importance of paying attention to the motives or goals of individual citizens when attempting to explain not just political interest but political behaviour as well. As Miller and Krosnick (2004) note, existing explorations of political behaviour privilege accounts focused on the abilities and resources of citizens, and thus on their perception of the costs of engagement, while shortchanging attention to the motives that animate engagement. This bias towards cost-centred accounts of engagement has been mostly replicated in the rather sparse literature on the antecedents of political interest, which has principally focused on the role played by demographic variables (particularly gender), educational attainment, and socialisation experiences in moulding citizen skills and resources (Denny and Doyle, 2008; Fitzgerald and Curtis, 2012; Prior,

2010; Shani, 2009). It is my belief that this focus on resources and skills, while important, is ultimately insufficient to explain interest, as they require an account of the motivational forces behind the acquisition of distinctly political skills (e.g. why does one join a political extracurricular during high school in the first place) as well as behind their use (e.g. even if one has civic skills due to non-political organisation behaviour, why and when does one become motivated to use them politically). This study should therefore be seen as part of a burgeoning, and important, effort to untangle the motivational bases of engagement (Dawes et al., 2011; Miller, 2013).

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Jamie Druckman, Samara Klar, Thomas Leeper and Rachel Moskowitz for their in-depth critiques, comments, and help in advancing this project from a germ of an idea to where it is now. All errors remain my own.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Supplementary Information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

- S1. Description of Treatment Materials and Question Wording.
- S2. Randomisation Checks and Power Analysis.
- S3. Additional Analyses.
- S4. Full Text of Treatment Materials.

Notes

- 1 This definition is consistent with the understanding of interest in the literature on interest in educational settings, where the development of interest in a subject-matter is predicated on perceptions of task value and one's competencies (Hulleman et al., 2010; Renninger and Su, 2012).
- 2 While the focus is on social motivations and interest, this type of goal certainly does not exhaust the list of relevant ends that may be connected with engagement to stimulate interest. I will discuss this point in greater detail in the conclusion.
- 3 Also see work on social motives and donating money and pro-environmental behaviour (Bolsen, 2013; Sinclair, 2012).
- 4 What about negative social motivations (i.e. the desire to avoid social pressure and associated feelings of shame through conformity) – is internalisation also likely in this case? It is plausibly the case that such interventions would not lead to internalisation, that is, to greater interest, or perhaps have only a weak effect. Negative social motivations carry with them a sense of being compelled to perform an action, which seems quite distinct from having an interest in or *wanting* to perform some action or actions. Work on the development of intrinsic motivations suggests that they are likely to occur when individuals feel they have freely chosen to perform the action rather than when they have been compelled by some other authority to do so (e.g. Ryan and Deci, 2000). Note, furthermore, that the theory of planned behaviour, perhaps the most influential expectancy-value model of motivation, maintains separate causal pathways for social pressure (via subjective norms) and attitudes in affecting behavioural intentions and thus behaviour (see Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010). It is possible that negative social motivations could prompt engagement and thus expose people to experiences that foster the perception that engagement serves interest-inducing positive social motivations, but that is a distinct account.
- 5 Participants were able to complete an alternative assignment and thus opt out of study participation if they desired.
- 6 See Supplementary Appendix S2 for randomisation checks. Group assignment is well balanced and results are robust to the inclusion of demographic variables as covariates; see Table 2 in-text and analyses performed in Supplementary Appendix S3. In addition, the analyses provided in Table 1 are also robust to the use of randomisation tests, as shown in Supplementary Appendix S2.

- 7 Participants were also given the opportunity to select more information concerning academic, pre-professional, religious and arts clubs on campus.
- 8 While in-text the focus is on difference of means analyses, in Supplementary Appendix S3, both beliefs are also regressed on dummy treatment indicators and their interaction. We find the expected influence of the treatment indicators without strong evidence of an interaction.
- 9 Significance tests in Tables 1 and 2 are two-tailed. However, given that H2 was directional in nature, some texts suggest that a one-tailed significance test may be appropriate (Blalock, 1979). Under this less stringent test, we would see greater evidence of significant effects here, particularly on the local interest and registration info measures. Power analyses in Supplementary Appendix S2 suggest that sample size considerations are also cutting into our ability to detect significant effects here.
- 10 Specifically: National Interest ($t_{84}=3.90$; $p<0.01$), Local Interest ($t_{84}=2.24$; $p<0.05$), Registration/Absentee Voting Information ($z=1.78$; $p<0.10$), and Political Clubs Information ($z=3.21$; $p<0.01$).
- 11 Thanks to the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this analysis. Also note that an alternative specification was performed, wherein interest is regressed on the full set of condition indicators, that is, Social Benefits (Yes vs. No), Efficacy (None, High and Low) and their interactions (see Supplementary Appendix S3). The conclusions are the same. As noted, these models also tend to report more negative effects for assignment to the Low Efficacy condition that perform better on tests of statistical significance.
- 12 Covariates include age, gender, race, year in school, whether the respondent indicated that they had grown up partially or entirely outside the United States, strength of partisanship, and ideology. Full model results are included in the Supplementary Information.

References

- Addonizio E, Green DP and Glaser JM (2007) Putting the Party Back into Politics: An Experiment Testing Whether Election Day Festivals Increase Voter Turnout. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 4: 721–727.
- Baumeister RF and Liar MR (1995) The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation. *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (3): 497–529.
- Bennett SE (1986) *Apathy in America 1960–1984: Causes & Consequences of Citizen Political Indifference*. Dobbs Ferry, NY: Transnational Publishers, Inc.
- Blalock HM Jr (1979) *Social Statistics*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Bolsen T (2013) A Light Bulb Goes On: Norms, Rhetoric, and Actions for the Public Good. *Political Behavior* 35: 1–20.
- Brambor T, Clark WR and Golder M (2006) Understanding Interaction Models: Improving Empirical Analyses. *Political Analysis* 14: 63–82.
- Campbell A, Converse PE, Miller WE, et al. (1960) *The American Voter*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Campbell DE (2006) *Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape our Civic Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dahl RA (1971) *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Davenport TC, Gerber AS, Green DP, et al. (2010) The Enduring Effects of Social Pressure: Tracking Campaign Experiments over a Series of Elections. *Political Behavior* 32: 423–430.
- Dawes CT, Loewen PJ and Fowler JH (2011) Social Preferences and Political Participation. *The Journal of Politics* 73 (3): 845–856.
- Delli Carpini MX and Keeter S (1996) *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Denny K and Doyle O (2008) Political Interest, Cognitive Ability and Personality: Determinants of Voter Turnout in Britain. *British Journal of Political Science* 38 (2): 291–310.
- Druckman JN and Kam CD (2011) Students as Experimental Participants. In: Druckman JN, Green DP, Kuklinski JH, et al. (eds) *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.41–57.
- Eccles JS and Wigfield A (2002) Motivational Beliefs: Values, and Goals. *Annual Review of Psychology* 53: 109–132.
- Enos RD, Fowler A and Vavreck L (2014) Increasing Inequality: The Effect of GOTV Mobilization on the Composition of the Electorate. *The Journal of Politics* 76 (1): 273–288.
- Fishbein M and Ajzen I (2010) *Predicting and Changing Behavior: The Reasoned Action Approach*. New York: Taylor & Francis Press.

- Fitzgerald J and Curtis KA (2012) Partisan Discord in the Family and Political Engagement: A Comparative Behavioral Analysis. *The Journal of Politics* 74: 129–141.
- Gerber AS and Green DP (2000) The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment. *The American Political Science Review* 94 (3): 653–663.
- Gerber AS and Rogers T (2009) Descriptive Social Norms and Motivation to Vote: Everybody's Voting and So Should You. *The Journal of Politics* 71 (1): 178–191.
- Gerber AS, Green DP and Larimer C (2008) Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Larger Scale Field Experiment. *American Political Science Review* 102 (1): 33–48.
- Gerber AS, Green DP and Larimer C (2010) An Experiment Testing the Relative Effectiveness of Encouraging Voter Participation by Inducing Feelings of Pride and Shame. *Political Behavior* 32: 409–422.
- Hulleman CS, Godes O, Hendricks BL, et al. (2010) Enhancing Interest and Performance with a Utility Value Intervention. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 102 (4): 880–895.
- Kam CD (2012) Risk Attitudes and Political Participation. *American Journal of Political Science* 56 (4): 817–836.
- Lazarsfeld PF, Berelson BR and Gaudet H (1968) *The People's Choice*, 3rd edn. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lodge M and Taber CS (2006) Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (3): 755–769. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3694247>
- McDermott R (2011) Internal and External Validity. In: Druckman JN, Green DP, Kuklinski JH, et al. (eds) *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.27–41.
- Milbrath LW and Goel ML (1977) *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics?* 2nd edn. Chicago, IL: Rand McNally Publishing Company.
- Miller JM (2013) The Motivational Underpinnings of Political Participation. In: La Raja RJ (ed.) *New Directions in American Politics*. New York: Routledge, pp.209–232.
- Miller JM and Krosnick JA (2004) Threat as a Motivator of Political Activism: A Field Experiment. *Political Psychology* 25 (4): 507–523.
- Mullinix KJ, Leeper TJ, Druckman JN and Freese J (forthcoming) The Generalizability of Survey Experiments. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*.
- Nickerson DW (2008) Is Voting Contagious? Evidence from Two Field Experiments. *The American Political Science Review* 102 (1): 49–57.
- Panagopoulos C (2010) Affect, Social Pressure, and Prosocial Motivation: Field Experimental Evidence of the Mobilizing Effects of Pride, Shame, and Publicizing Voting Behavior. *Political Behavior* 32: 369–386.
- Panagopoulos C (2013a) Extrinsic Rewards, Intrinsic Motivations, and Voting. *The Journal of Politics* 75 (1): 266–280.
- Panagopoulos C (2013b) Positive Social Pressure and Prosocial Motivation: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment on Voter Mobilization. *Political Psychology* 34 (2): 265–275.
- Panagopoulos C (2014a) I've Got My Eyes on You: Implicit Social-Pressure Cues and Prosocial Behavior. *Political Psychology* 35 (1): 23–33.
- Panagopoulos C (2014b) Watchful Eyes: Implicit Observability Cues and Voting. *Evolution and Human Behavior* 35: 279–284.
- Panagopoulos C, Larimer CW and Condon M (2014) Social Pressure, Descriptive Norms: and Voter Mobilization. *Political Behavior* 36 (2): 451–469.
- Prior M (2010) You've Either Got it Or You Don't? The Stability of Political Interest over the Life Cycle. *The Journal of Politics* 72 (3): 747–766.
- Renninger KA and Su S (2012) Interest and Its Development. In: Ryan RM (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Human Motivation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.167–190.
- Rosenstone SJ and Hansen JM (1993) *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York: Longman.
- Ryan RM and Deci EL (2000) Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being. *American Psychologist* 55 (1): 68–78.
- Schattschneider EE (1960) *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Shani D (2009) *On the Origins of Political Interest*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Sinclair B (2012) *The Social Citizen: Peer Networks in Political Behavior*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Verba S, Schlozman KL and Brady HE (1995) *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zukin C, Andolina M, Keeter S, et al. (2006) *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Author Biography

Joshua Robison is a post-doctoral researcher at Aarhus University working on questions regarding the relationship between social class and voting behaviour. He received his PhD from Northwestern University where he studied the origins of political interest. Recent publications have appeared in *Political Communication* and the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*.