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Conversational Flow

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Chapter nine

If They Were to Vote,
They Would Vote for Us

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Abstract

In two field studies, we examined whether voters overestimate support for their political party among nonvoters. In Study 1, voters estimated the percentage of votes their party would receive in an upcoming election, and this percentage increased when voters estimated the percentage of votes their party would receive if nonvoters also were to vote. In Study 2, participants overestimated support for their party even when we made them explicitly aware of current levels of this support by presenting them with poll-based forecasts of election results. Furthermore, Study 2 demonstrated that commitment to vote for a specific party predicted the degree of overestimation. Our results imply that highly committed voters are particularly likely to project support for their party onto nonvoters. Implications for the literature on social projection and social identity are discussed.

If They Were to Vote, They Would Vote for Us

At election time, parties as well as voters aim to maximize their number of political allies. When voter turnout is low, however, the actual number of a party's supporters in the entire population is ambiguous. This ambiguity allows voters to believe that an unrealistically large proportion of nonvoters are tacit supporters of their party. This phenomenon is central to the research reported here.

It has been noted that politicians often purport to speak for an entire nation (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996), perhaps to make it seem as though their viewpoints have the backing of a majority. However, this behavior may also reflect a broad tendency among people to overestimate levels of public support for their own political viewpoints. In the United States, many supporters of both the Democratic and the Republican parties were convinced that their respective party had won the 2000 presidential election. The fact that a large proportion of potential voters did not vote in the election may have exacerbated this difference of opinion.

Psychological research suggests that a simple phenomenon may explain this overestimation of party support: People are prone to engage in *social projection*, the tendency to expect other people's preferences to be similar to one's own (see Krueger, 1998, for a review). The belief that other people are similar to oneself may promote a sense of social support and validation (Marks & Miller, 1987; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977; Sherman, Presson, & Chassin, 1984). Research shows that such projection is particularly strong when people make assessments of members of their in-group (Robbins & Krueger, 2005). However, projection is much less strong—and can even reverse—when people make assessments of out-group members (Mullen, Dovidio, Johnson, & Cooper, 1992; Robbins & Krueger, 2005; Spears & Manstead, 1990).

In the case of political opinions, this imbalance makes a lot of sense. Media coverage and public debate ensure that opposing political views are highly salient. This salience limits the freedom with which

supporters of a political party can project their own political preferences onto the supporters of another party. However, in an election with a low turnout of voters, the political views of a large proportion of the population are unknown. Nonvoters constitute an interesting cohort: From a voter's perspective, they are neither in-group members nor out-group members. They are therefore an ideal target for social projection. Nonvoters may thus unwittingly contribute to voters' exaggerated perceptions of support for their political parties.

Prior research on social categorization and projection has always clearly demarcated group membership (see Robbins & Krueger, 2005, for a review). Indeed, we are unaware of any research that has tested the hypothesis that people whose group membership is unknown can serve as targets of social projection. This hypothesis complements the idea that the primary targets of social projection are in-group members. We propose that by projecting their political preferences onto nonvoters, whose political affiliation is by definition unknown, voters cognitively extend the boundaries of their in-group as far as the constraints of reality will allow. In so doing, they include in their own group individuals whose group membership is unknown. In the research reported here, we tested the hypothesis that voters perceive nonvoters as being tacit supporters of their own political party.

Additionally, we predicted that people's commitment to vote for a political party would influence their tendency to overestimate the support for that party by expecting nonvoters to support it. There are two reasons why highly committed voters could be particularly prone to projection. First, higher commitment entails a stronger need to validate one's opinions (Marks & Miller, 1985), and projection provides such validation. Second, highly committed voters should be motivated to promote their party's success and, therefore, to project support for their party onto nonvoters.

In two field studies, we tested these hypotheses. In Study 1, we examined the extent to which voters included nonvoters among the members of their party's political base. In Study 2, we examined whether this over-inclusiveness was amplified by voters' commitment to vote for their party.

Study 1

Methods

Participants. Participants were recruited at polling stations in The Netherlands during the city-council elections in March 2010 ($N = 158$; 57% male, 43% female; age range = 18–72 years, mean age = 33.25 years, $SD = 13.61$). One hundred sixteen participants indicated which party they planned to vote for in the upcoming parliamentary election (in June 2010), and 94 of these participants estimated the percentage of votes their party would obtain in the election. Analyses were based on these 94 participants.

Procedure and materials. After they had cast their votes, participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire. First, they indicated which party they planned to vote for in the parliamentary election. They then estimated the percentage of votes they expected their party to receive (estimated support among the voting public) and the percentage of votes they expected their party would receive if all nonvoters also were to vote in the election (estimated support if everyone voted).

Results and discussion

In line with our hypotheses, a paired t test revealed that voters expected that their party's percentage of votes would increase if nonvoters were to vote in the election (estimated support among the voting public: $M = 18.46\%$, $SD = 10.42$; estimated support if everyone voted: $M = 21.63\%$, $SD = 13.43$), $t(93) = 5.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.11$. The fact that voters expected a disproportionate share of nonvoters to support their party shows that the targets of voters' social projection were not restricted to verifiable in-group members. More specifically, voters' estimates of the percentage of votes their party would receive increased by 3.17% when they included hypothetical votes cast by nonvoters in their estimations.

Projection is a plausible and parsimonious explanation for this increase: Because nonvoters' opinions are unknown, voters can freely

project political preferences onto them. Our results could be explained not only by cognitive processes but also by motivational processes: Voters may project their views onto nonvoters because they desire (and perhaps expect) the success of their in-group. Prior research has indeed suggested that people who are highly identified with the political party they support tend to strategically maintain permeable group boundaries for their party because such inclusiveness increases the level of support they perceive their party to have (Morton, Postmes, & Jetten, 2007).

If there were a motivational basis to the effect observed in Study 1, we would expect that highly committed voters would show larger biases than do voters with low commitment. In Study 2, we therefore tested whether voters' level of commitment to vote for a particular political party predicted the degree of their overestimation of nonvoters' support for that party. Moreover, we presented participants in Study 2 with poll-based forecasts of election results to examine whether voters would overestimate public support for their party even when they were made explicitly aware of how much their estimation deviated from the level of support indicated by polls.

Study 2

Methods

Participants. A few weeks before the national election, 414 participants filled out a questionnaire on the streets of three cities in The Netherlands. We analyzed data only from participants who indicated that they would vote for one of the seven largest political parties and who provided both an estimate of the distribution of parliamentary seats that would be won by these parties and an estimate of the seats that would be won by these parties if nonvoters were also to vote. Two hundred seven participants (57% male, 43% female; age range = 18–76 years, mean age = 40.27 years, $SD = 16.49$) met these criteria and were included in our analyses.

Procedure and materials. Participants were asked whether they planned to vote in the upcoming parliamentary election and, if so, for

which party. Commitment to vote for a party was measured with two items: "Voting for this party is important to me" and "I am certain that this is the party I want to vote for." Participants indicated their agreement with these statements using 5-point scales (1 = *disagree*, 5 = *agree*) and scores for the two items were averaged to create a single score.²⁹ They were then presented with a poll-based forecast of the distribution of seats that would be won in the upcoming parliamentary election³⁰ and were asked to estimate the number of seats that would be won by each of the seven largest political parties in that election. After making this estimation, participants were informed that not all citizens would vote and that the distribution of seats might be different if all citizens, including nonvoters, were to vote in the election. Participants were then instructed to estimate how the seats in parliament would be distributed among the seven largest parties if all citizens were to vote.

Calculating overestimations. To calculate participants' overestimation of support for their party among the voting public, we subtracted the number of seats the forecast had indicated the party would win from the number of seats participants predicted the party would win. We similarly subtracted the number of seats the forecast had indicated each participant's party would win from the number of seats the participant predicted that party would win if everyone voted. The difference between the two estimates indicated the extent to which participants included nonvoters as supporters of their party. We controlled for the degree to which voters predicted that nonvoters would support other parties, given that it was theoretically possible that voters would overestimate the number of seats that would be won not only by their own party but also by other parties. The pattern of results did not change when we analyzed the data without controlling for this possibility.

²⁹ Pilot testing ($N = 44$) showed that this measure correlated positively with Allen and Meyer's (1990) commitment scale, $r = .48$. Additionally, the measure correlated positively with the Identification Scale by Leach et al. (2008), $r = .52$.

³⁰ The forecast was based on the mean results of the two largest parliamentary election polls, conducted by Synovate and Maurice de Hond (April 19, 2010), respectively.

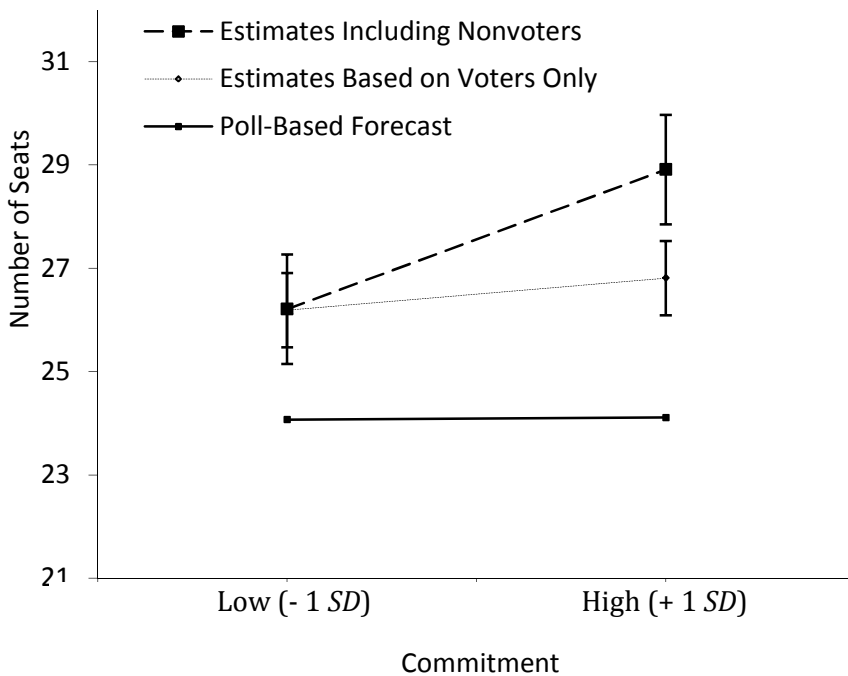
Results and discussion

Overestimation. As expected, *t* tests showed that both support among the voting public ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 5.73$), $t(206) = 8.15$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.14$, and support if everyone voted ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 8.56$), $t(206) = 6.99$, $p < .001$, $d = .97$, were significantly overestimated (values are larger than 0); this finding indicates that participants expected their party to obtain more seats than current polls indicated it would, whether or not they included nonvoters in their estimates. On average, voters overestimated the number of seats their party would win if nonvoters were to vote by 4.16 seats, or 18%.

Commitment. Scores on commitment were standardized prior to analysis. We used a repeated measures analysis of variance with commitment entered as an additional factor to examine whether it predicted the extent to which voters overestimated the support for their party among nonvoters. We found a main effect of estimation type (support among the voting public vs. support if everyone voted), $F(1, 203) = 4.00$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$; overall, the degree of voters' overestimation increased when they included nonvoters in their estimations of party support. More important, however, the predicted interaction between commitment and estimation type was significant, $F(1, 203) = 5.27$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Commitment positively predicted the expected support of nonvoters (see Figure 9.1).³¹ Participants with a low level of commitment to their party (1 *SD* below the mean) overestimated the number of seats their party would win in the upcoming elections by an average of 2.12 seats ($SE = 0.72$) in their estimates of support among the voting public (i.e., predictions based only on the behavior of actual voters) and by about the same number of seats when they included nonvoters in their estimations ($M = 2.14$ seats, $SE = 0.72$). However, voters who were highly committed to vote for their party (1 *SD* above the mean) overestimated the number of seats their party would win in the upcoming elections by an average of 2.70 seats ($SE = 1.06$) in their estimates of support among the voting public, but by an average of 4.80 seats ($SE = 1.06$) when they included nonvoters in their estimates.

³¹ We obtained similar significant results when we removed outliers whose overestimation scores deviated more than 2.5 standard deviation from the mean ($n = 7$).

Figure 9.1. Mean number of parliamentary seats that each of the seven largest political parties were expected to win in the upcoming election according to polls, mean number of parliamentary seats that participants estimated their party would win, and mean number of parliamentary seats that participants expected their party would win if nonvoters also were to vote in the election. Participants' mean estimates are shown for participants with a low level of commitment to vote for their party (1 *SD* below the mean) and for participants with a high level of commitment to vote for their party (1 *SD* above the mean). Error bars represent standard errors.



In summary, our results show that voters overestimate the level of public support for their party, even in the face of poll-based election forecasts that contradict such overestimations. Voters expect their party to receive a disproportionate amount of votes in upcoming elections, and these disproportionate expectations become more pronounced when voters estimate their party's level of support among both voters and nonvoters. In addition, more strongly committed voters are more

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likely to overestimate support for their party by considering nonvoters to be tacit in-group supporters.³²

General Discussion

In two field studies, we found that voters tend to overestimate support for their party by assuming that nonvoters would support that party if they were to vote. Moreover, Study 2 showed that this tendency is especially strong among people who are highly committed to vote for their party.

In line with the literature on social projection, voters in our studies overestimated the level of public support for their own party in elections. This overestimation occurs even when voters are presented with election forecasts indicating actual levels of support. Our results also show that overestimation is more pronounced when voters can project their views onto targets whose views are unknown. Specifically, people's overestimation of public support for their party increases when they estimate how many votes their party would receive from both voters and nonvoters, rather than from voters alone.

These findings suggest that psychological processes may explain why political leaders are so reluctant to resign themselves to representing a minority viewpoint: They are likely to consistently overestimate the number of their supporters. Thus, when politicians and staunch supporters claim that their parties have broad-based support, they may do so for more than rhetorical reasons (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996): They may genuinely believe that their support base is broader than it actually is. Our research demonstrates that ordinary voters exaggerate public support for their party, too.

Our findings have significant implications for the field of psychology. They suggest that targets of social projection include not only verifiable

³² An alternative explanation for this finding is that our measures of perceived support tapped into people's belief that participation is a function of party affiliation. According to this account, parties that are perceived to have active supporters should be allocated relatively little support among nonvoters. Analyses did not support this alternative explanation ($F_s < 1$).

in-group members but also people whose group membership is unknown. This finding is somewhat unusual from the perspective of research on social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985). Indeed, research suggests that people are prone to in-group overexclusion because they are afraid to misidentify out-group members as in-group members (Leyens & Yzerbyt, 1992). Moreover, research has shown that highly identified group members are the most keen to keep group boundaries closed so that their group will include only genuine supporters (Castano, Paladino, Coull, & Yzerbyt, 2002; Marques & Paez, 1994). It thus seems reasonable that staunch party supporters should be particularly wary of counting nonvoters among members of their political in-group.

In light of this previous research, why does our research show that highly committed voters appear to be prone to in-group *overinclusion*? One reason for this finding is that we examined voters' social projection onto individuals whose party affiliations were unknown—meaning that they were neither in-group nor out-group members. But perhaps the more important reason is that our study was conducted in the context of an election, in which parties were seeking to broaden their support (i.e., they had an external focus on improving their chances in the election) rather than to identify true-blood supporters (i.e., they did not have an internal focus on purity). This interpretation is consistent with research by Morton et al. (2007), which showed that highly identified group members endorse deviant group members whose support would benefit the group. Ironically, the most strongly committed party supporters are likely to be the most flexible in assigning boundaries to their group.

In conclusion, supporters of political parties appear to overestimate public support for their party by including nonvoters as supporters. In this sense, low turnouts in elections may not pose a problem for established parties; rather, low turnouts may provide an opportunity for party supporters to overestimate the degree of public support for their worldviews.

Nonvoting as support

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