How Stable is the Sense of Civic Duty to Vote? A Panel Study on the Individual-Level Stability of the Attitude

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Introduction

Since Riker and Ordeshook (1968) first modified the voter utility function to include ''duty'' as one of the terms, civic duty has been characterized as ''the psychological benefit derived from following the injunctive norm of voting'' (Gerber & Rogers, 2009, p. 181). Research has provided strong evidence that ''people who believe that all citizens have the obligation to vote go to the polls more than those who do not hold this belief'' (Harder & Krosnick, 2008, p. 536. See also Blais, 2000; Blais & Achen, 2018; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2004).

Work that includes civic duty among the predictors of electoral participation has generally assumed that civic duty is antecedent to turnout; as such, it affects voting behavior rather than being affected by it. Some studies challenge that view, arguing that, in fact, when asked in the context of a survey, individuals rationalize their perception of the duty to vote based on their previous participation, or not, in elections (Dowding, 2005; Matsusaka & Palda, 1999). In this study, we assess the temporal stability of the sense of civic duty and, by doing so, evaluate whether the public's perception of civic duty does constitute a plausible antecedent to voting or not.[1]

In studying the stability of the sense of civic duty to vote, we also make an important contribution to the characterization of this political attitude. By knowing whether and to what extent individuals change their beliefs in the duty to vote over time, we should have a better sense of whether short-term factors (beyond voting) have any influence on it. The implications of our research should be of particular interest for scholars studying the effects of civic campaigns and the possibility that adherence to the voting norm among new generations—which has been found to be very low—might improve in the short term (Dalton, 2007, 2008).

Drawing on past studies on attitudinal stability, we test the stability of the sense of civic duty empirically by means of a structural equation model that accounts for measurement error. To do this, we make use of data from the 2005–2010 British Election Panel Study and the 2010–2017 Spanish Democracy, Elections and Citizenship Panel Study. To our best knowledge, these are the studies with the largest number of waves (nine) that include a civic duty measure, thus allowing a stringent measurement of the stability of the political attitude in question.

Our results suggest that civic duty attitudes are very stable over time, a finding that stands up in the case of different survey samples, civic duty measures, elections, inconsistent voting behavior, model specifications, and between-wave intervals.

The Stability of the Sense of Civic Duty to Vote

Attitude stability gained attention as a research subject with Converse's work (1964), in which he found relatively high temporal stability for partisanship but low stability for ideological stances. Stability—understood as a resistance to change-inducing stimuli (Erber et al., 1995)—has since become a core attitudinal trait that indicates how well an attitude is able to predict a subsequent behavior (Doll & Ajzen, 1992; Glasman & Albarracín, 2006; Prislin, 1996; Schwartz, 1978). As such, stability is often considered an aspect of the strength of an attitude (Fazio, Chen, McDonel, & Sherman, 1982). Following in Converse's footsteps, several studies from the political behavior literature have tested and found evidence of high stability among key attitudinal political behavior predictors, from partisanship to political interest (Green & Palmquist, 1994; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2004; Markus, 1979; Miller, 1991; Prior, 2010, 2018; Schickler & Green, 1997).

There is, however, no compelling evidence about the stability of the sense of civic duty to vote, preventing a better understanding of the connection between that political attitude and turnout.[2] Specifically, while most researchers assume that civic duty antecedes turnout (Blais, 2000; Clarke et al., 2004; Galais & Blais 2016b; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), others argue that, in fact, individuals rationalize their sense of duty to be consistent with their electoral behavior, which seriously challenges the role of duty as a turnout predictor (Dowding, 2005; Matsusaka & Palda, 1999).

[1]For a different test with a turnout model, see Galais and Blais (2016a). See also Kosmidis (2014) for a test on the stability of the duty-turnout link; specifically, whether and the extent to which the effect of civic duty on turnout increases the closer the election day looms, or not.

[2]Previous work, such as Blais and Achen (2018), Campbell (2006), and Blais and Young (1999), does not rely on large cross-national panel data, nor account for measurement error when assessing the stability of sense of civic duty.

Shedding light on the stability of the civic duty to vote will not only solve this discrepancy, but also clarify the potential effects of civic cam- paigns, and whether civic duty can increase, in the short term, from its current low levels for new generations.

There are good reasons to expect high stability. Civic duty qualifies as an affective attitude given that it derives from an affective attachment toward one's community (Blais & Galais, 2016; Galais & Blais, 2016b; Hur, 2018); affective attitudes are known for being stable (Almond & Verba, 1963; Krosnick, 1991). Also, due to its moral nature (Blais & Galais, 2016), a sense of duty is likely to predispose individuals against divergent views (Skitka, Washburn, & Carsel, 2015), thus hampering attitudinal change. Moreover, because dutiful subjects constitute the majority of the population, who support a dominant social norm (Bolzendahl & Coffe´, 2013; Dalton, 2008; Rolfe, 2012; Sinclair, 2012), they might have low chances of encountering change-inducing stimuli. Finally, twin studies report a genetic influence on the sense of duty to vote (Loewen & Dawes, 2012), and personality traits have also been found related to duty (Blais & St.Vincent, 2011; Weinschenk, 2014), all of which suggests that sense of duty to vote is an early formed, change-resistant attitude.[3]

On the other hand, Bowler and Donovan (2013) posit that, given that civic duty entails a social contract between the state and citizens, ''any perceived misconduct in the political system should erode a sense of duty among voters'' (Bowler and Donovan, 2013, p. 269), therefore undermining its stability. In the same vein, Galais and Blais (2014) detect a small decrease in the level of young Spaniards who felt a duty to vote during the Great Recession. Putting those two different perceptions regarding the stability of civic duty to the first rigorous empirical test, our study adjudicates between them, providing evidence of the stability, or instability, of that political attitude over time.

Estimation Approach

Ever since Achen (1975) reported that Converse (1964, 1970) had overestimated the degree of attitude change by ignoring measurement errors, studies on attitude stability have made use of structural equation modeling (Green et al., 2004; Krosnick, 1991; Prior, 2010, 2018).[4] Following Achen's and Wiley and Wiley's (1970) lead, we employ a two-stage model in which we first regress observed duties on a group intercept,[5] as well as their corresponding latent duties and a (measurement) error term, and,

[3]Additionally, research has identified links between civic duty and stable political attitudes, such as political interest (Carreras, 2018; Prior, 50, 201864).

[4]Importantly, as these models account for measurement errors at the individual level, aggregate-level stability tests are deemed unreliable. As such, our study concentrates on civic duty stability at the individual level.

[5]Given the increase in civic duty mean across waves (from 3.93 to 4.44 in the BEPS dataset, and from 2.12 to 2.58 in the DEC dataset, on a 1–5 and a 1–4 scale, respectively), we follow Kline (2016) and add a group intercept in our measurement equation. Adding a group intercept also at the lag-1 equations stage yields identical stability coefficients, while it augments the fit values (for the worse).

subsequently, regress each latent duty from the first stage on its antecedent latent duty and a disturbance term. Our model can be expressed mathematically as:

$$y_t = n_t + \lambda_t * m_t + \varepsilon_t (\text{First stage : Measurement stage})$$

$$m_t = d_t \text{, when } t = 1 \text{ (Second stage : Lag — 1 equations stage)}$$

$$m_{t+1} = \beta_t * m_t + d_{t+1}, \text{ when } t = 2, 3, \ldots, T (\text{Second stage : Lag — 1 equations stage})$$

where y_t refers to observed duty, n_t to group intercept, λ_t to factor loading, m_t to latent duty, ε_t to (measurement) error term, β_t to stability coefficient, and d_t to disturbance term, all at time t. The stability of the sense of civic duty is indicated by the stability coefficients: values closer to zero indicate instability, while values closer to one indicate stability.

Scholars often struggle with model identification when using the same or a similar structural equation model. With only a few degrees of freedom, they force the error terms to be equal, and do not allow them to covary. With many degrees of freedom due to a large number of panel waves (nine), we estimate stability coefficients through a baseline model with only one of those constraints (error terms do not covary). Still, we also estimate stability coefficients using an alternative model that does not impose any of those constraints on the error terms.[6]

To assess the stability of sense of civic duty, we make use of data from the 2005–2010 British Election Panel Study (BEPS), and original data from the 2010–2017
Spanish Democracy, Elections and Citizenship (DEC) Panel Study. We chose these two studies as they have measured respondents' sense of civic duty nine times, thus allowing the estimation of stability coefficients over multiple time-points and with few model constraints, and over relatively long intervals (5 and 7 years, respectively).

In addition, these studies include civic duty measures from before, during, and after two British and two Spanish general elections, when post-hoc rationalization of the act of voting—and, thus, change—is most likely to occur (see Supplementary Appendix B for fieldwork date of each BEPS and DEC wave). Moreover, the Spanish sample includes young people—specifically, between 15 and 45 years old—, who are more open to attitudinal change (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989).

The BEPS study and the DEC study further differ with respect to the way in which they assess respondents' civic duty to vote, allowing an even more stringent test of civic duty stability. The BEPS question states: ''I would be seriously neglecting my duty as a citizen if I didn't vote,'' which is followed by an agree-disagree scale. In contrast, the DEC question reads: ''For some people voting is mostly a duty. They think they should vote regardless of their views on the parties. For others, voting is a choice. They decide whether to vote or not according to their opinions about the parties. For you, is voting first and foremost a duty or a choice?''. Those who

[6]Less contested by the literature, we follow Achen (1975) and Wiley and Wiley (1970) and assume that observed duties and latent duties are measured on the same scale, that disturbance terms do not covary among themselves or with latent duties from other waves, and that error terms do not covary with latent variables or with disturbance terms. For a graphic representation of those models, see Supplementary Appendix A.

answered ''a duty'' were subsequently asked how strongly they felt that voting is ''a duty'': ''not very strongly,'' ''somewhat strongly,'' or ''very strongly.''[7] Both of these civic duty measures have been equally used by the civic duty literature (e.g., Blais & Achen, 2018; Kosmidis, 2014; Sanders, Clarke, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2007; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015).

It is important to note that the BEPS dataset considers 1,524 individuals. In contrast, the number of Spaniards that were retained after nine panel waves in the DEC dataset was only 204. While the response rate in the DEC study (26%) fits the Spanish pattern—the Spanish Labour Force Survey retention rate is, for example, 19.8—, and most Spanish respondents do not consider voting a duty, but rather a matter of personal choice, our results from the DEC data should be construed as additional evidence regarding civic duty stability, or instability.

Results

Table 1 presents the coefficients from our individual stability tests. Supporting the ''stability'' argument, we find that civic duty attitudes are very stable. With a good model fit,[8] stability coefficients are, indeed, often above .94, that is, close to the maximum possible value of 1.00. In a few instances (e.g., column 1, W5–W6 and W6–W7; column 3, W7–W8 and W8–W9), the stability coefficients are in fact 1.00.[9] Importantly, those coefficients differ only marginally across our British and Spanish datasets, thus, across different civic duty measures and survey samples.

We also observe that the stability coefficients are equally close to their maximum value in electoral periods. Considering pre-election/campaign intervals, the stability coefficients are .99 (BEPS W1–W2), .92 (BEPS W7–W8), .97 (DEC W2–W3), and 1.00 (DEC W7–W8). Similarly, regarding campaign/post-election intervals, stability coefficients are .98 (BEPS W2–W3), .94 (BEPS W8–W9), .94 (DEC W3–W4), and 1.00 (DEC W8–W9). Importantly, while the alternative model specification (with ovariance between the error terms) yields a slightly better fit, it yields practically identical conclusions regarding the stability of civic duty; specifically, the stability coefficients are high and close to 1.00 (see Table 1, columns 2 and 4).

[7]To give an overview of the distribution, most respondents in the BEPS dataset either ''strongly agree'' or ''agree'' with the statement (in W1 the distribution is 38 and 35%; in W9, it is 68 and 18%). In contrast, most respondents in the DEC dataset answer ''a choice'' to the civic duty question (in W1, 53% do such, whereas 3, 22, and 22% answer ''not very strongly,'' ''somewhat strongly'' and ''very strongly'' a duty; in W9, 37% do such, whereas 1, 29, and 33% answer ''not very strongly,'' ''somewhat strongly,'' and ''very strongly'' a duty). Following past work (Prior, 2010), we transformed these civic duty measures to a 0–100 scale in order to avoid negative variances. Also, because these entail a five-point and a four-point civic duty measure, stability coefficients are estimated by means of a robust maximum-likelihood estimator (Prior, 2010).

[8]The literature usually considers a good model fit when the Santorra–Bentler adjusted chi-squared is associated with an insignificant (and high) *p*-value, and when the comparative fit index (CFI) passes the .95 threshold. It is also important that the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is lower than the .06 cutoff point, and that the upper limit of its confidence intervals does not surpass the .08 threshold (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

[9]Comparing those results with Goodman–Kruskal gamma-type rank correlations, we observe that civic duty would be deemed slightly less stable if we ignored measurement errors (see Supplementary Appendix C).

Table 1: Civic Duty Stability as Indicated by Stability Coefficients from Baseline and Alternative Structural Equation Models (without and with Covariance between Error Terms)

	2005–2010 BEPS(Waves 1–9)		2010–2017 DEC(Waves 1–9)	
	Baseline model (no covariance between error terms)	Alternative model(covariance between error terms)	Baseline model (no covariance between error terms)	Alternative model (covariance between error terms)
W1–W2	.99	.98	.99	1.00
W2–W3	.98	.99	.97	.95
W3–W4	.96	1.00	.94	.98
W4–W5	.92	.91	.97	1.00
W5–W6	1.00	1.00	.95	.97
W6–W7	1.00	1.00	.96	.95
W7–W8	.92	.92	1.00	1.00
W8-W9	.94	.95	1.00	1.00
Var ζ_1	190.84	196.33	634.17	667.61
Var ζ_2	128.56	163.25	493.44	547.10
Var ζ_3	130.25	146.83	403.16	536.53
Var ζ_4	178.66	168.14	424.72	497.79
Var ζ_5	184.89	189.38	513.27	505.02
Var ζ_6	175.59	178.57	366.65	370.35
Var ζ_7	151.86	154.69	480.77	531.21
Var ζ_8	84.83	114.74	490.50	594.02
Var ζ_9	91.84	111.26	348.29	390.20
Santorra–Bentler adjusted ^{2}	40.38	15.06	16.07	8.02
df	19	11	19	11
p-value	.003	.18	.65	.71
CFI	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
RMSEA	.04	.02	.00	.00
90% CI	.02; .06	.00; .05	.00; .07	.00; .08
N	1,524		204	

Note: Stability coefficients are unstandardized. Values close to zero indicates instability; values close to one, stability. Different intervals separate two adjacent panel waves. Stability coefficients obtained with both baseline and alternative models suggest a high stability of sense of civic duty. Fit statistics indicate a good model fit particularly with the alternative model specification.

While these results in particular weaken the argument that turnout causes civic duty, we went further and tested if civic duty is also stable among individuals who are most likely to change their sense of duty based on their voting behavior, namely, those who changed from voting to abstaining between the 2005 and the 2010 British elections, or vice-versa. The results are consistent with our previous findings. While a lower stability coefficient follows the 2010 election, suggesting some rationalization, it is still high: .83—or .77 with the alternative model specification (see Supplementary Appendix D).

We also tested the stability of the sense of civic duty with a slightly larger Spanish sample (w = 376) resulting from considering only 8 DEC panel waves. Our results were essentially the same. That is, although the stability coefficient from the W2–W3 (pre-election/campaign) interval dropped .09 (from .97 to .88), it remained close to 1.00 (see Supplementary Appendix E).

Last, we noted that, consistent with past work (Erikson, 1979), the stability coefficients are not affected by the time elapsed between panel waves. Indeed, the stability coefficient obtained in the largest interval of the BEPS (i.e., 25 months) is .92, only .04 lower than the coefficient obtained in a 12-month interval (column 1, W4–W5 and W3–W4). Similarly, the DEC surveys conducted 12 months apart (DEC waves 5–9) yield approximately the same stability coefficients as the DEC surveys separated by only 6 months (DEC waves 1–4).

Discussion

Our research estimated civic duty stability by means of a structural equation model. With data from two different datasets, the 2010–2015 BEPS and the 2010–2017 DEC, containing different survey samples, and civic duty measures, we found evidence that civic duty is a very stable attitude. That finding was robust also for elections, inconsistent voting behavior, different model specifications, and between-wave intervals.

Our study is limited in some respects. While we have shown that civic duty attitudes are very stable up to a 25-month interval, they may be less so over longer periods. Furthermore, our results might be only indicative of stable civic duty responses. Further research should explore with experimental data the stability of civic duty.

Still, our findings have important implications for the literature on electoral behavior and political attitudes. First, while some studies argue that duty reflects a post hoc rationalization of the act of voting, which makes feelings of duty a poor predictor of turnout, our findings suggest that civic duty is a very stable attitude—as are partisanship (Green et al., 2004) and political interest (Prior 2010, 2018)—, and are hence a plausible antecedent of turnout. In that sense, civic duty would affect turnout, not the reverse.

Furthermore, our findings give support to the view that individuals are marginally affected by appeals to their civic duty, insofar as their aim is to change civic duty attitudes (Geys, 2006). At best, these attitudes might be activated (but not ''boosted'') by these appeals. Moreover, our findings suggest that the lower adherence to the voting norm that is observed among new generations of citizens might be permanent and is not sensitive to life cycle or contextual effects. Maybe the educational efforts of the authorities that are concerned about civic duty and turnout should concentrate on childhood and early adolescence.

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