

Political Conformity: Evidence and Mechanisms

Elizabeth Suhay

Department of Government

School of Public Affairs, American University

Washington, D.C.

suhay@american.edu

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Introduction

Have you ever gone to work on a hot summer's day and thought to yourself upon arriving at the office: *how strange, it appears as though everyone is wearing clothing?* Have you ever gone to a baseball game and been startled during a "seventh-inning stretch" to find nearly the entire stadium standing? Have you ever leafed through your old high school yearbook and thought to yourself, incredulously, *why is everyone smiling?* For most people, the answer to these questions is a resounding *no*. For contemporary Americans at least, these behaviors seem natural. Yet, a little reflection demonstrates that they are in fact socially constructed. In other contexts (the beach, indigenous cultures), warm weather brings near-nudity. People do not stand in unison to stretch at other points during baseball games (or during other sporting events). In earlier eras, students did not grin so gamely for the camera. These contemporary office dwellers, baseball-game goers, and high school students are conforming to social norms.

These examples are intended to illustrate two aspects of social conformity. First, it pervades many (if not all) aspects of our lives (Turner 1991). Second, most of us are not aware of how many of our behaviors—and beliefs and opinions as well—are influenced by the human tendency to conform to our peers (Cialdini 2005; Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, and Griskevicius 2008). The political sphere is no exception. Political conformity is both common and mostly invisible to people (Cohen 2003). Yet, in part because of its stealth nature, the ubiquity and power of conformity to influence political beliefs, opinions, and behaviors is not sufficiently appreciated or understood by scholars.

In this essay, I strive to accomplish three goals. First, I define political conformity, differentiating it from the related concepts of compliance and persuasion. Second, I assemble empirical evidence for political conformity. Third, and finally, I discuss possible psychological mechanisms underlying conformity generally. As political scientists have paid woefully little attention to conformity, most of the evidence we have with respect to mechanisms comes from other fields, particularly Psychology.

Definition

Conformity is a type of social influence. This latter, broad category can be defined in a straight-forward way: it represents the myriad ways in which people—in person, represented, or even simply imagined—have an impact on other people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Yet, as Turner (1991, 1) points out, such a category essentially represents the entire field of Social Psychology; it is too broad to be especially meaningful. We can narrow our purview by turning to dictionary definitions of conformity,

which have in common an emphasis on similarities of behavior among groups of people: the lay definition of *conform* is to bring one's behavior into line with peers in a group or society more generally.

Psychologists further divide up the lay definition of conformity according to the *reasons for* behavioral similarity. To engage in "compliance" is to knowingly bring one's behavior—which includes one's self-professed beliefs—into line with others in order to advance one's interests (for example: to avoid punishment, or to improve one's reputation). *True* conformity, according to many scholars, involves an actual "change of heart," to use the common phrase. To conform is to change one's mind about what beliefs, opinions, or behaviors are appropriate or best; any outward displays of conformity, then, are due to this internal conversion process (Turner 1991).

This focus on psychological conversion still leaves an important definitional question, however: how is conformity different from persuasion? Whereas persuasion involves intentional communication on the part of one party to influence others (O'Keefe 1990, 17), such intentions are normally absent in conformity. Conformity is driven more by the person conforming than by those to whom the person seeks to conform. In addition, being persuaded tends to involve a conscious, cognitive process of decision-making that involves the reception of new information and/or the consideration of arguments (O'Keefe 1990). In contrast, conformity is largely implicit (Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, and Griskevicius 2008) and is in part defined by the irrelevance of new information or arguments. Finally, persuasion is a process that can take place between any two (or more) individuals. In the case of conformity, as we will discuss further later, shared group identity is paramount (Turner 1991).

In sum, conformity is a largely implicit psychological process whereby individuals come to believe that group norms are appropriate and, for that reason, bring their beliefs, opinions, and/or behavior into line with them. This definition succeeds in differentiating conformity from related phenomena, yet it still leaves much ambiguity as to the precise implicit psychological mechanisms that bring conformity about. We turn to those in the penultimate section of the essay.

For most individuals, conformity is a daily occurrence, shaping their lives in ways both large and small. But what about *political* conformity, specifically? We can think of political conformity as a subset of the general phenomenon of conformity. It simply represents those instances when individuals conform to politically relevant group norms, i.e., widely shared beliefs, opinions, and behaviors that relate to the governance of a polity. Note that this definition purposefully does not otherwise specify actors or circumstances. The Supreme Court, Members of Congress, corporate CEOs, union members,

family members, and school children all engage in politically relevant communication (some more than others) and, in the process, likely experience some level of political conformity.

Political conformity has profound implications for the social sciences and society. Theoretically, conformity represents an important challenge to other explanations for individuals' political beliefs, opinions, and behaviors, especially rational choice and biopolitics theories. Normatively, conformity's implications are highly mixed. I discuss these important implications in the concluding section.

Evidence

The best empirical evidence for conformity, as described above, meets several criteria. First and foremost, evidence must be causal, not just correlational. Belief, opinion, or behavioral change must be demonstrated—whether through a longitudinal panel study or a controlled experiment. In this way, scholars rule out one of the most important alternate contributors to within-group similarity: *homophily* (like being attracted to like). Second, the change agent must consist of socially shared information and not direct experiences which all group members happen to have shared.¹ Third, the social information must be a simple norm—a belief, opinion, or behavior common in a group of individuals—and not a persuasive argument. Fourth, and finally, to rule out compliance, there must be evidence for internalization. Not all of the evidence reviewed in this section meets all of these criteria, but much of it does, particularly the experimental studies. I begin with seminal and influential early studies of conformity in the field of Psychology and then move to Political Science.

The most persuasive early evidence for conformity came from experimental psychologists. Sherif (1966 [1936]) famously exploited an optical illusion known as the “autokinetic effect”—individuals who observe a stationary point of light will perceive it to move; however, estimates of that movement are idiosyncratic. In one version of the experiment, Sherif first had participants observe a set of pin-point lights and report their judgments individually. Then, he brought participants together into groups, asking participants to again observe a set of lights and estimate their apparent movements in front of peers. Finally, he separated participants, asking them to observe a final set of lights. Sherif found that individuals developed personal norms in the first stage, converged with their peers in the second stage,

¹ There are many reasons why categories of individuals often hold similar perspectives on politics. One powerful yet simple explanation is that group members share many experiences in common which can shape their interests and values. Such experiences include resource abundance or deprivation, vulnerability to different types of crime, type of employment (or lack thereof), societal respect or discrimination, and unique information environments, among many others.

and maintained these group norms in the final stage of the experiment. Participants had internalized the group's frame of reference and, moreover, appeared to be unaware of the group's influence.

In an even more seminal conformity study, Asch (1951) sought to challenge Sherif's conclusions. Asch hypothesized that group conformity in Sherif's studies occurred because of the ambiguous nature of the stimulus and that, when asked to make a perceptual judgment with a clear "correct" answer, group conformity would disappear. Asch brought participants together in a group setting, displayed a target line, and asked participants which line in a set of three others matched it. Unbeknownst to one naïve participant, all of the other "participants" were in fact confederates. On a majority of trials, the confederates made a unanimous, and clearly incorrect, judgment. Conformity indeed decreased relative to the Sherif studies; however, participants conformed approximately one-third of the time. Additional permutations reduced but did not eliminate conformity, e.g., when judgments were allowed to be private and when the naïve participant was joined by a correct confederate "partner" (see Turner 1991, ch. 1). Asch's study has been replicated numerous times in many countries. Its findings are robust. This said, in a meta-analysis, Bond and Smith (1996) find less conformity in the U.S. over time and variation according to cultural context (with collectivist cultures conforming more than individualist ones).

Many additional psychological studies provide evidence for social conformity, including conformity to social and political norms. (See Turner 1991 for a review.) However, given the robust evidence for conformity, psychologists have turned from demonstrating conformity to understanding its mechanisms in recent decades. We turn to this subject in the next section.

At present, we shift our attention to evidence for *political* conformity specifically, a subject investigated by psychologists and political scientists alike. One of the first such studies was carried out in the 1930s by social psychologist Theodore Newcomb of students at all-female Bennington College, an especially liberal college. In a carefully designed longitudinal study, Newcomb found that most of the students—who were relatively conservative when they enrolled—became considerably more politically liberal throughout their education (Newcomb 1963). Comparisons to a control group of female college students who did not attend Bennington revealed that the liberalizing effect of attending Bennington was greater than attending college in general. The "Bennington effect" also remained apparent many decades later in a follow-up study (Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991).

Early voting scholars, writing around the time Asch and others were making strides in the study of social conformity, showed great interest in the subject as an explanation for political attitude change

as well as the tendency for social group members to hold similar political preferences. Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), in their famous study of Elmira, New York, argued that conformity among nonpolitical social groups (family, community, religion) was a key cause of individuals' political perspectives. The authors concluded: "preferences are 'contagious' over the range of personal contacts" (p. 122). Their evidence for conformity (as opposed to other influence processes) is suggestive but not determinative: in addition to much within-group similarity, the researchers observed participants shifting their views over time (across three interviews) in the direction of group norms; further, those who were "cross-pressured"—members of disagreeing groups—were more likely to remain ambivalent.

Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) are well-known for their attention to informal social influences on political attitudes, arguing that political partisanship is a social identity formed early in life in response to socialization by parents and others. It is less well-remembered that, like Berelson et al., they also name social conformity specifically as an important influence on opinion. Campbell et al. wrote: "[N]orms and values attributed to a generalized 'group': these are the expectations concerning appropriate behavior for [e.g.] the 'loyal' Catholic or union member. It is the group standards that are psychologically real and are responsible for influence when it occurs" (p. 296). Unfortunately, the survey research methodology employed—and championed—by these authors stymied their efforts to discover conformity at work. To study conformity effectively, one requires either longitudinal studies of linked individuals or controlled experiments; the authors' cross-sectional surveys did not fit the bill.² Even so, Campbell et al. (1960, ch. 12) do provide some suggestive evidence of social influence in unions and racial and religious groups: The authors demonstrate within-group political similarity even after controlling for many confounds; they also demonstrate that those who have belonged to groups (here, they look at unions) for the longest period of time are most prototypical in their political attitudes.

There appeared to be little interest in political conformity in the field of Political Science in the decades after these studies were published. Two factors likely contributed to this decline. The first is methodological—an over-reliance on the cross-sectional survey in the study of public opinion not only made the careful study of conformity impossible but also encouraged researchers to conceive of political attitudes as formed in social isolation. Second, the field of Psychology was slow to explain the

² In one survey-based study by Campbell and colleagues [FIND CITE], the authors attempted to measure social influence by simply asking respondents whether another person had influenced their voting decision. They uncovered little evidence of social influence, which is not surprising given the implicit nature of much influence as well as the likelihood that social desirability bias discouraged participants from admitting to any social influence of which they were aware.

mechanisms underlying social conformity. The inability to adequately explain *why* social conformity occurred cast doubt on its viability as an empirical concept. Further, those who did posit a mechanism pointed to some type of “social pressure” at work. Political scientists at the time were becoming enamored of rational choice theories; social pressure certainly did not fit the emerging paradigm.³

Political scientists certainly did continue to study social influences over political beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors; however, the work proceeded under different labels and with varying assumptions regarding the reasons for influence. The area of research that is probably closest to the study of conformity proper is the study of “bandwagon effects.” In this line of research, scholars examine the influence of polls on citizens’ preferences. The presumption is that a frontrunner clearly identified in polls will produce further support for that candidate (or party, or issue position), as people “jump on the bandwagon.” Such studies have become rather notorious for their disparate effects (in spite of the common concern, often discussed in the news media, that polls inevitably induce conformity to majority opinion). Hardmeier (2008) brings needed order to the subject with a meta-analysis of dozens of such studies. Focusing on experimental studies, she finds that, on average, the “bandwagon” effect hovers between 5 and 10%. Examples of bandwagon effects that emerge from quality experimental studies include Marsh (1985), who studies abortion attitudes in Britain; Nadeau, Cloutier, and Guay (1993), who study the topics of abortion and Quebec’s constitution in Canada; and Rothschild and Malhotra (2014), who study the topics of troop levels in Afghanistan, free trade, and public financing of elections in the U.S. Hardmeier (2008) also finds that poll effects tend to be larger for experimental stimuli revealing trends (increasing popularity) as opposed to a snapshot of majority support. Bartels’ studies of momentum during Presidential nominations (1985, 1987) provide real-world examples of the influence of poll trends. While bandwagon effects have been documented by many researchers, the reasons *for* these effects are not well-understood. Hypotheses vary widely, ranging from strategic decision-making to an emotional desire to “be on the winning team” (Hardmeier 2008).

Several additional research areas in Political Science that have flourished over the past several decades overlap considerably with the study of political conformity: political socialization; political networks; and political cues. To begin, there is little question that many studies of political socialization share much in common with the study of conformity. While the field has more recently broadened its scope in various respects (Sears and Brown 2013; Stoker and Bass 2011), early studies of political socialization focused on a limited range of influencers—particularly parents, peers, and schools—on the

³ This paragraph needs citations. Suhay (2015) and Toff (2015) discuss this in brief.

political attitudes and behaviors of young people. Most of the well-known early studies had in common the following empirical approach: researchers interviewed a representative sample of some population while also capturing the views of socially related individuals, whether families, students, peers, or community members. To test for the occurrence of socialization, researchers assessed attitude and behavioral similarity between related individuals (e.g., parents and their children) as well as the conditions under which such similarity was greater (e.g., issue salience; homogeneity of opinion among socializing agents). While empirical tests from the turbulent 1970s turned up weak evidence of socialization (Campbell 1980; Jennings and Niemi 1974; Tedin 1974), later studies discovered evidence for considerably more influence (Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009). Although these studies have been conducted under the “socialization” label, their methodology closely resembles that of Berelson et al. (1954) and Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb (1991), described above. Thus, to the extent that they demonstrate social influences on children, these studies cannot rule out conformity as a contributing factor. Theoretically, these studies do tend to emphasize social learning (not conformity) as the reason for influence (Bandura 1969; Jennings and Niemi 1974; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009; although see Campbell 1980, who emphasizes conformity); however, their empirical inattention to the psychological mechanisms of socialization leaves the reason for—and, therefore, the type of—influence uncertain.

Turning to social networks, the theoretical and empirical relationship between this field and that of social conformity is highly similar to the one described above. From a theoretical perspective, network scholars tend to emphasize the causal impact of information exchange embedded in political discussion (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt and Johnson 2004; although see Sokhey and McClurg 2012); however, the psychological mechanisms of influence are underexplored in such studies. Thus, network researchers’ findings that political discussants influence one another’s political views and behaviors may well be driven in part by conformity processes.

Finally, there exists an unappreciated link between the voluminous literature on political cues and the topic of conformity. In the course of these studies—often experimental—researchers have found persuasive evidence that citizens tend to favor policies or candidates they perceive to be supported by their party’s elites (and, in some cases, to oppose policies or candidates perceived to be supported by the opposition party). Researchers have traditionally argued that such cues are “information shortcuts” and that the psychological mechanism driving the influence of elite cues is citizens’ efforts to efficiently match policies and candidates to their political values and interests (e.g., Lupia 1994; Popkin 1991; Zaller 1992). However, some more recent scholars have considered the

possibility that cue effects are driven by the desire to conform to the partisan in-group (see Cohen 2003; Nicholson 2012; Toff 2015). Again, extant empirical scholarship in this area has not attempted to adjudicate between these competing mechanistic claims, leaving it an open question whether elite cues are influential more for heuristic or for social conformity reasons.

Looking back over more than a half-century of research on various social influences on citizens' political perspectives and behaviors, it is all too clear that social conformity per se has been an unpopular topic in Political Science. As I'll discuss below, this has changed in the past decade or so. But until very recently, research explicitly devoted to conformity was rare. Important exceptions include Mutz's *Impersonal Influence* and Chong's *Rational Lives*. Yet, these works fit only uncomfortably under the conformity label. Mutz's argument closely resembles standard persuasion approaches; she argues that majoritarian norms stimulate citizens to search for reasons for the norm (resulting in self-persuasion). Chong argues that adherence to values and norms is largely due to rational pursuit of gains through group coordination; from this perspective, people do not internalize values and norms, they simply comply—going along to get along, as they say. While these frameworks may explain a piece of social influence, they diverge considerably from traditional definitions of conformity in Psychology, which emphasize the implicit internalization of new beliefs or attitudes in response to group norms.

In contrast to earlier decades, the last decade has seen a relative bull market in the study of political conformity. Of particular note is a series of ingenious field experiments conducted by Gerber, Green, and colleagues in which some participants are randomly assigned to stimuli intended to make voting norms salient and/or to provide them with the impression that their adherence to such norms is being monitored. These studies provide persuasive evidence that voter turnout is indeed driven in part by a desire to comply with voting norms (see Davenport 2010; Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008, 2010; Gerber and Rogers 2009; Panagopoulos 2010; see also Bolsen 2013 for an application to conservation behavior). For example, in Davenport (2010), study participants who talked with a canvasser displaying a print-out of the participant's voter history were approximately 10% more likely to vote than those who were engaged in a more traditional canvassing effort. The only drawback of such studies with respect to the study of political conformity is that—as the authors admit (e.g., Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008)—technically their interest is in compliance to behavioral norms. Internalization of such norms, e.g., whether increased turnout would continue without the threat of public monitoring, is not examined. Only a handful of studies published in Political Science have examined conforming *attitudes* and, thus, documented the internalization of group norms. In a study of perceptions of Presidential debate

performance, Fein, Goethals, and Kugler (2007) demonstrate across four experiments that the perceived judgments of other audience members produce surprisingly large shifts in participants' opinions of candidate quality. Suhay (2008, 2015) experimentally varies exposure to in-group and out-group attitudinal norms, demonstrating that individuals will conform their attitudes to in-group norms but will reject (and even move away from) out-group norms. Finally, in an intriguing survey-based study of the UK's House of Lords, Russell (2015) provides evidence that high levels of voting cohesion within parties are driven by group conformity rather than institutional punishment and reward systems.

Mechanisms

The question of psychological mechanisms has been central to the study of conformity in part because it is central to the *definition* of conformity. For most of the concept's history, conformity has been identified as playing a role in social influence largely by the ruling out of more intuitive mechanisms. When a person who adheres to a group norm does so despite (1) a lack of new substantive information or persuasive arguments being exchanged as well as (2) a lack of obvious negative consequences to rejecting group norms, we say the person has conformed. Yet, a behavioral phenomenon missing any positive reason for its occurrence is obviously problematic. Social scientists, mainly psychologists, have made considerable gains in understanding what causes individuals to conform in recent decades. Today, psychological mechanisms remain central to the definition of conformity; however, scholars now are better able to name precise mechanisms that distinguish conformity from related concepts, such as compliance. Below, I briefly discuss mechanisms for compliance (often confused with conformity) and then proceed to those for conformity.

Compliance

Definitions of compliance differ in the literature (see Cialdini and Goldstein 2004 for a perspective different from that presented here). One robust tradition in Psychology grows out of early studies of social influence in group settings, such as Asch's famous line-length studies. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) argued that the "group pressure" Asch discovered could be divided into two types: *normative* influence and *informational* influence. Normative influence involved following the crowd out of a desire for the social rewards that stem from fitting in. Crucially, people engaged in this behavior do not believe the group perspective is correct; thus, their public behavior may adhere to norms, but their private behavior does not. On the other hand, *informational* influence leads a person to believe the group norm is correct; the group perspective is taken to be a type of evidence. In a series of experiments modifying

Asch's study, Deutsch and Gerard indeed find evidence in support of their view: mainly, group influence was reduced when study participants gave their answers in private, i.e., with no group monitoring. While the authors' evidence is ultimately too general to support their most specific mechanistic claims regarding normative and informational influence, their work represents an importance and influential advance with respect to distinguishing compliance from conformity.

Broadening Deutsch and Gerard's framework somewhat, other scholars have argued that compliance represents adhering to a norm one does not believe to be correct out of a desire for rewards, or the avoidance of punishments, controlled by the group (Kelman 1958; Turner 1991).⁴ One of the best ways to demonstrate compliance at work experimentally is—following Deutsch and Gerard (1955)—to make a group norm salient to a participant and then expose him or her to social monitoring by peers. This is exactly the method followed by Gerber, Green, and colleagues. The researchers randomly assigned stimuli such as promising to publicize whether citizens turned out in an upcoming election (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008; Panagopoulos 2010) or giving citizens a printed record of their past turnout (or lack thereof) (Davenport 2010; Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2010). In nearly all cases, public exposure of voter turnout—real or implied—increased voting intentions and turnout.

Conformity

Conformity is distinguished from compliance in that a person believes the norm in question is correct. An important mark of conformity is that the relevant belief, opinion, or behavior will be expressed in private as well as in public. Recall that Deutsch and Gerard argued that such internalization will only take place if informational influence has occurred: a person observes the stated views or behaviors of others, infers that they have some good reasons for them, and proceeds to bring his or her own views or behaviors into line with the group. For example, follow-up interviews conducted by Asch revealed that many of his participants believed they suffered from a vision problem and therefore followed the lead of the majority (Asch 1951). Given the emphasis on correct perception, it is not surprising that

⁴ Compliance is distinguished from obedience in that, in the latter case, a person sees him or herself as an agent of a legitimate authority, carrying out the authority's desires. Thus, the difference between these two concepts is not the presence or absence of an authority figure but, rather, the reasons for agreeing to an authority figure's demand. If the reason is ingratiation or fear of punishment, then the type of influence is compliance. If the reason is submission to a perceived legitimate authority and the relinquishing of responsibility, then the type of influence is obedience (Milgram 1974; Turner 1991).

informational influence is more common under conditions of uncertainty and when group members are perceived to be better judges of what is correct than the individual (Turner 1991 [CHECK]).

There is little question that people sometimes endorse conventional wisdom or engage in common behaviors because they believe popularity is evidence of correctness. This said, many scholars are under the misimpression—due in large part to Deutsch and Gerard’s persuasive article—that informational influence is the *only* reason why a person would internalize a norm.

Social Identity

Researchers, mainly psychologists, have demonstrated through numerous studies that a person’s social identities are critical to norm adherence. In a seminal article detailing results from three experiments, Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, and Turner (1990) demonstrate that both compliance and conformity depend on the individual identifying with those exhibiting a norm. (Also see Wood, Pool, Leck, and Purvis 1996.) An earlier generation of researchers interested in political conformity likewise singled out social identification as key, although their observational methods were admittedly less able to isolate identity as a causal contributor to influence. For example, Campbell et al. write, “whenever a group holds distinctive beliefs about some issue, then within the group a differentiation appears between members according to the strength of their group identification” (1960, 308). Likewise, in the course of his study of the Bennington College women, Newcomb observed that those who appeared to identify most closely with the school and with their classmates exhibited the greatest conformity to liberal political norms (Newcomb 1963; Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991).

That subjective group membership is critical to compliance is not hard to understand—social rewards and punishments can hardly be distributed by individuals with whom we do not interact. But why should social identity matter to conformity, i.e., the internalization of group norms? Contemporary scholars’ explanations of this aspect of conformity build on early work by Festinger (1950), who argues that other people’s opinions offer the individual helpful, if indirect, social evidence of what is true when direct evidence is not available.⁵ Turner and colleagues (1987, 1991), as a part of “self-categorization theory,” add to this idea the following: only in-group members provide accurate social reality tests. All people engage in self-categorization, dividing the world into social groups and categorizing themselves as belonging to certain of these groups. When a social category to which a person belongs is made

⁵ Festinger (1950) describes these two processes as “social reality testing” and “physical reality testing.”

salient, this individual will automatically perceive any accompanying group norm as also describing him or her. In a sense, conformity within self-categorization theory is a form of self-stereotyping.

Emotions

Self-categorization theory offers a compelling explanation for conformity; however, while critical of the informational influence tradition, it is similarly focused on cognition. Its innovation is to make shared social categorization a necessary condition to perceiving social information as relevant to the self.

Yet, there exists considerable evidence that there is more to group conformity than just cognition. Generally speaking, norm adherence and avoidance appear to evoke a range of emotions. Failing to abide by common behavioral norms is particularly uncomfortable for people, typically causing anxiety, embarrassment, guilt, and/or shame. Adhering to norms is less eventful emotionally but can foster feelings of well-being and pride. For discussions of the emotions related to norm adherence, see, e.g., Elster (1999), Goffman (1959), Lewis (2000), and Scheff (1988). Scheff in particular emphasizes the import of “self-conscious” emotions (pride, embarrassment, and shame) to norm adherence. He writes that “pride and shame make up a subtle and pervasive system of social sanctions. This system leads to experiencing social influence as compelling” (1988, p. 396).⁶ Only a handful of scholars have applied this emotional framework to the study of adherence to *political* norms. Noelle-Neuman (1993) names negative emotions, particularly embarrassment, as a key factor in the “spiral of silence.” More recently, Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2010) and Panagopoulos (2010) have argued that pride and shame are the psychological mechanisms that motivate compliance with voting norms, although they do not test this supposition directly. Suhay (2008, 2015), discussed further below, appears to have done the most to integrate emotion into the study of political conformity, also focusing on pride and shame.

There are three recurring problems in scholarship on emotional aspects of norm adherence, however. First, researchers often pay little attention to norm internalization, focusing only on outward evidence of conformity. This may have something to do with the fact that many of the scholars who have shown the most interest in the role of self-conscious emotions in conformity have been sociologists, not psychologists (e.g., Goffman 1959; Scheff 1988). Second, while there is no doubt that self-conscious emotions tend to co-occur with norm adherence or deviation, we sadly know little about whether these emotions can be considered *causes* of conformity (rather than just being

⁶ Other researchers have developed related explanations for norm adherence that emphasize the desire to avoid ostracism (e.g., Knapp, Bäck, and Bäck 2015).

epiphenomenal). Third, and finally, emotions researchers have done little to clarify which norms are likely to induce adherence via self-conscious emotions: Is a person embarrassed by failing to abide by any group norm, even those of groups of which he or she is not a member?

Social-Emotional Influence

Suhay (2008, 2015) addresses the shortcomings of these two theoretical traditions—one emphasizing identity, and the other emotion—by integrating them. While a more cognitive style of influence likely operates (in the tradition of Deutsch and Gerard, Turner, and others), there exists an emotional route to influence as well that is common. The self-conscious emotions of pride, embarrassment, and shame encourage not only behavioral compliance with norms but also their internalization. We feel pride upon adhering to a norm (because we perceive or imagine peers' admiration) and embarrassment or shame upon deviating (because we perceive or imagine derogation). Importantly, these self-conscious emotions do not arise in response to *any* situation where a norm is encountered; rather, self-conscious emotions arise when we encounter in-group norms and perceive or imagine the judgments of individuals with whom we socially identify. Over time, our beliefs, attitudes, and actions become positively or negatively affectively tagged in memory according to their popularity within our social identity groups. In effect, this theoretical framework takes Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) normative influence and argues that such influence can lead to the internalization of group norms. A distinct advantage of this theory relative to other theories of conformity (and compliance) is that it offers an explanation for the evident, but not well-understood, affective component of shared values and norms.

The general outlines of this framework—the causal influence of social identification and, especially, self-conscious emotions—are supported by evidence from two conformity experiments that manipulate perceived political and religious norms and either prime or measure participants' emotions (Suhay 2015). This said, more empirical work is needed to replicate these effects in other contexts, assess their durability over time, and differentiate the “social-emotional influence” process and its effects from more cognitive theories of conformity.

Conclusion [To come!]

Implications

Theoretical

- Conformity helps to explain at least two things that have not been well-explained in Political Science: (1) why people are often so attached to values that appear to undermine their interests; and (2) why members of groups are so similar. In doing so, it challenges two popular theories in Political Science: rational choice and biopolitics.
- The challenge to rational choice is most obvious: the tendency to conform likely means our political opinions and behaviors are to a considerable extent divorced from self-interest.
- The challenge to biopolitics is more subtle and interesting. Conformity itself is highly likely to be an evolved trait (although one that can be heightened or dampened), widely shared among humans. Yet, it provides a direct counter to suggestions that biology drives human differences. From the perspective of conformity, we are born not as blank slates but as blank sponges, porous to cultural influences. Ubiquitous biological conformity can go a long way toward explaining class, gender, race, national, religious (etc.) differences.

Normative

- Reflecting its evolved nature, conformity offers tremendous benefits to humans. See, e.g., Elster and Chong. Political conformity in particular enhances coordination and stability in a polity.
- However, conformity obviously has drawbacks as well—group norms are sticky, and may change too slowly in the face of clear information that they are harmful. Conformity can lead to persecution of minorities and, short of that, shame on the part of those who are unwilling or unable to conform. See J.S. Mill. In highly diverse polities, conformity to the in-group fuels between-group polarization.
- In another sense, the normative implications of conformity are completely context-dependent and subjective. We tend to like conformity when it encourages attitudes and behaviors we like; we tend to dislike conformity when attitudes and behaviors we dislike are the outcome.
- Normative work on this subject is needed: How can we harness the good in conformity while limiting the bad?

Future Research

Conformity is a vastly underappreciated contributor to political beliefs, opinions, and behaviors.

- Using lab, field, and natural experiments, researchers might attempt to estimate the extent to which political views and behaviors can change in response to group norms in typical settings.
- Researchers should apply conformity frameworks to novel political influence settings, especially (1) individuals in legislatures and bureaucracies and (2) individuals using social media.⁷ Where experimental work is impossible, natural experiments and observational methods may be used.
- Researchers should identify common moderators of political conformity, such as: strength of identification; self-confidence; group uniformity; group expectations of conformity.

⁷ Not surprisingly, this literature is already developing. For example, see Muchnik, Aral, and Taylor (2013) and Suhay, Blackwell, Roche, and Bruggeman (2015).

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