

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exploring Social Norms as a Group-Level Phenomenon: Do Political Participation Norms Exist and Influence Political Participation on College Campuses?

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This research explores the relationship between campus political norms and student political participation. This study conceptualizes norms as a group-level construct by collecting data at several universities ($k = 32$ universities, $n = 1,389$ students) where norms vary without campaign intervention. Multilevel modeling reveals that perceptions of political norms converge within universities. Further, frequency of political communication at the group- and individual-level explains increases in normative perceptions. This increase is meaningful because norms at the group level were predictive of political behaviors at the individual level. This research documents the existence of political norms beyond the individual level of analysis and highlights the important role of political norms, political communication, and social context in understanding political participation.

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How individuals come to make political decisions and participate in the political process are questions that lie at the heart of democracy. According to the classic work of Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), voting behavior can be explained by group norms. Their research found that two thirds of the electorate claimed knowledge of how particular socioeconomic and ethnic groups vote, believed that voting preferences were predictable based on demographics, and that people tended to be correct in their estimates of the voting norms for certain groups. In conjunction with their influential book, *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944), Lazarsfeld and colleagues' research articulated and empirically supported the importance of social perceptions on voting behavior. Newcomb (1943) provides another classic example of normative political influence. His study revealed that conservative freshman attending a liberal college became increasingly liberal over their tenure at the college. Despite the promise and prominence of these findings,

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and although some notable exceptions exist (e.g., Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995), political communication research focusing on social environments has yet to be fully reinvigorated. Therefore, this article revisits the classic argument that politics is a social act that is best understood by identifying and measuring the social environments in which it manifests.

The key premises of the current work are that (a) political participation is a social activity and (b) as a social activity, politics occur in a social context where norms are likely influential (Sherif, 1935; Turner, 1969). With few exceptions (e.g., Dalton, 2006; Gerber & Rogers, 2009; Glynn, Huges, & Lunney, 2009), the role of social norms as an important mechanism in political communication research is often overlooked in explaining political participation. Since the time of the aforementioned research on norms, the literature on social norms has grown substantially and can be used to integrate classic notions of political norms within a more contemporary framework. The social norm approach posits that people look to social referents before engaging in certain behaviors to ensure their behaviors are typical, and will be met with social approval. This investigation tests whether people go through this same process as they develop their political attitudes and engage in the political process. Through the merger of three prominent areas of research (political participation, social norms, and public opinion), this work examines how social environments influence political behavior. By analyzing political participation in a way that recognizes individuals are nested within an influential social context, theoretical insight is provided and implications for communication scholarship are advanced.

Political participation

Political participation refers to any activity intended to affect or influence public policy (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Political participation is voluntary and refers to an activity, reflecting a concern with “doing politics, rather than being attentive to politics” (p. 39). Verba et al.’s civic voluntarism model investigated how factors beyond socioeconomic status and education explain political participation. Their model suggests that three factors—motivation, capacity, and recruitment networks—influence participation decisions. Motivation concerns politically relevant cognitions at the individual level, such as engagement, ideology, and political interest. Capacity refers to access to political resources, such as time, money, and skill. Finally, networks of recruitment refer to institutions and other social and contextual features that make participation accessible.

One of the advances made by Verba et al. (1995) was the acknowledgment that structures imbedded within one’s social environment are partially responsible for promoting participation, and that the reason people might not get involved with politics is because they were never recruited. Institutionalized structures create opportunities for community members to get involved in a cause, and allow an organization the opportunity to disseminate their message and recruit more members.

To test Verba et al.'s (1995) claim regarding the importance of political opportunities provided by one's social network, the current research was conducted with college students at college campuses for important theoretical reasons. First, structures embedded within the college environment reduce the cost of political participation (Downs, 1957) by providing organizational opportunities such as funding university-sponsored political clubs. Second, the college demographic (age 18–24) consists of new political participants; suggesting that, as voting eligible citizens, they are most impressionable and susceptible to environmental political influence (Almond & Verba, 1963; Converse, 1969; Krosnick & Alwin, 1989). Third, a well-established positive relationship between level of education and political participation exists. Because people attending college are more likely to vote in the future, sampling this relevant population within their nascent political years is likely to be informative.

Another reason why a student population was targeted was to get around a methodological issue that has plagued research interested in environmental influence. Adults often self-select into environments and communities for reasons related to politics such as quality of schools and level of income. Because these two demographic variables are strong predictors of political attitudes, environmental causality in these instances becomes difficult to disentangle (Johnson, Shively, & Stein, 2002). This study circumvents this self-selection problem based on the presence of one important benchmark, the age of 18. This benchmark coexists with college students first residing on campus. Apart from a location change, students also embark on a political change as they are given the right to vote. According to developmental psychologists (e.g., Rosenberg, 1988), political attitudes are not crystallized before the age of 18 due to cognitive constraints. Furthermore, high school students base their college decisions on a variety of factors, and the assumption here is that perceptions of the political climate is likely low on this decision-making list. These arguments augment the force of the causal claims made in this article, specifically that students' political attitudes and behaviors are being influenced by environmental factors during their college years. Although this causal logic is imperfect, this demographic provides an opportunity to minimize self-selection concerns.

The social norms approach

Social norm propositions claim that, particularly under situations of ambiguity, people look to referent others for guidance (Latane & Darley, 1970). It is argued here that these processes should be operating when an 18- to 21-year-old who has never voted in an election faces his or her first participation decisions. Given the novelty of this first election, tenets underlying social norm predictions should be particularly relevant when understanding the motivations behind college student's political attitudes and behavior.

Social norms can either refer to the perceived prevalence of a given act (i.e., descriptive norms), or refer to the social approval of an act (e.g., injunctive norms, Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Social norms research has found that normative

perceptions exert influence on a wide range of behaviors both political (e.g., Glynn et al., 2009) and otherwise (see Berkowitz, 2004 for a review). This line of research reports that perceptions of prevalence positively predict the likelihood, or frequency with which, individuals engage in a particular act. The mechanisms explaining this effect are that people feel a need to belong, do not want to be aberrant, and understand that engaging in socially accepted behavior increases their acceptance in desirable groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Consider Gerber and Rogers (2009) set of field experiments examining whether voting typicality messages impact voter turnout. In the low descriptive norm condition, the message stated that voter turnout had declined to distressing levels and that this trend needed to be reversed. The high condition stated that voter turnout has been higher than ever and encouraged participants to keep this trend going. According to the social norms approach (Berkowitz, 2004), the high norm message should lead to greater turnout than the low norm message because normative influence is predicated on the idea that people want to act in a way that is consistent with the majority. Congruent with social norm propositions, the high message was more effective in eliciting turnout than the low message for infrequent voters. This finding suggests that people make political decisions in a similar fashion to other decisions; they act in ways consistent with their perceptions of referent others' behavior.

Prior norms research has demonstrated that an individual's perception of surrounding norms impacts their behavioral decisions (e.g., Glynn et al., 2009; Sheriff, 1935). Furthermore, experimental evidence has corroborated that normative messages coming from outside sources also influence behavior in ways consistent with the norm manipulation (Cialdini et al., 1990; Gerber & Rogers, 2009). Absent from this line of research, however, is whether an agreed-upon norm exists outside an individual's frame of reference and experimental manipulation. Lapinski and Rimal (2005) point this out in their differentiation between personal norms and collective norms. Lapinski and Rimal argue that collective norms exist at the group level and emerge through shared communication among members of a social group, whereas personal norms exist at the individual (psychological) level, and represent an individual's perception of the collective norm. This study is interested in political descriptive norms that are collective in nature, which can be defined as the perceived prevalence or typicality of political participation behaviors and ideology at the group (i.e., campus) level. Due to the empirical support social norms research has received, and its popularity of use in the communication campaign literature, this theoretical investigation is of considerable importance.

A group-level approach

The social norms approach can benefit conceptually and empirically from the inclusion of group-level data. Social norms literature tends to rely upon links between an individuals reporting of their normative perceptions and their behaviors within one social context (e.g., Glynn et al., 2009; Rimal & Real, 2003, 2005).

Furthermore, although Berelson et al. (1954) studied norms at the group level, they did not measure how social context, defined as “the environment in which individuals reside and behave” (Johnson et al., 2002, p. 220), affects participation. In all abovementioned instances, previous studies by virtue of the research design could not measure contextual influence because all data were collected in the same environment. Thus, although past research has yielded insight into the influence of norms and context-specific moderators of behavior, the theoretical extension tested here is whether systematically varying the context (i.e., campus) illuminates previously hidden relationships. According to the definition of collective social norms, responses should vary systematically based on the campus where participants are sampled. This variance can be considered as the presence and measurement of collective social norms.

The social norm approach posits that people make behavioral decisions based on perceptions of how relevant others act. In order for social norms to operate, a referent group is necessary. This is because an act can only be considered typical of a group if more than two people belonging to some definable collective are engaging in this action. Beyond the argument that norms fundamentally require a group, an argument also must be made that norms must substantively exist and be identifiable beyond the individual level of analysis. Otherwise, people would be seen violating norms more often, there would be little consensus when normative violations occurred, and deviations would be less obvious. Social life, however, does not seem to operate in this manner. Despite a lack of explicit communication about what is normative, groups of people still seem to reach consensus about the norms of their group, and these norms are likely an explanatory variable for their social behavior. This being the case, it is both theoretically and methodologically troubling that most normative approaches do not address this level of analysis concern, and instead rely completely on individual-level data and analysis.

Despite a lack of empirical studies that measure environmental influence, theories that presume environmental influence abound in the public opinion literature, such as Noelle Neumann’s (1974) highly influential Spiral of Silence theory. Underlying this theory is the assumption that people observe the behaviors and opinions of referent others in an effort to understand behaviors or beliefs that gain approval and disapproval. Specifically, a spiral of silence ensues when people overestimate the prevalence of an opinion, and due to this overestimation refrain from expressing their beliefs due to a fear of rejection or ostracism. Within a democracy, the implication of this misperception is that policy does not reflect the publics’ opinions, which is highly problematic. Given the prominence of this theory in communication, and its importance for public opinion, revisiting the assumptions on which the model is founded is paramount.

If norms are perceivable at the group level, an important question for theorists and campaign designers becomes what accounts for normative variation at the group-level? Or in other words, why are some campuses perceived as being “more political” than others? One potential mechanism tested here is frequency of interpersonal

political communication, both actual and perceived. Students might perceive their campus as being more political because they overhear, or engage in, several political discussions. According to Lapinski and Rimal (2005), "individuals' communication patterns play a key role in the development of normative perceptions" (p. 137). The implication extending from this relationship is that if students engage in, or overhear, a higher frequency of political communication on campus, they will assume that the average student at their campus is more politically interested. Of practical importance, if communication is implicated in the transmission of political norms communication-based intervention strategies become possible, assuming that when people perceive political activity as more common, actual political behavior increases.

Research hypotheses

The purpose of this article is to approach the question of why people politically participate through multilevel modeling. Specifically, this research addresses whether certain environments are more political than others by assessing the convergence of political social norm perceptions. Theoretically, this also allows for a test of collective social norms, and examines whether social norms are influential both at the individual and group level. The second purpose of this research is to test whether frequency of interpersonal political communication explains students' reporting of political social norms within certain environments. Finally, this article examines whether group-level political norms predict individual-level political behavior. Taken together, this research provides information important to campaign designers looking to mobilize constituents toward political action.

The current research was conducted by collecting measures of perceived descriptive political norms and political behaviors on several different college campuses. If descriptive political norms uniquely exist based on environmental cues, then individual-level perceptions should converge within a common environment. *Thus Hypothesis 1 asserts that mean perceptions of political descriptive norms should significantly vary between college campuses.* This argument tests whether tangible norms exist and further conceptualizes the strength of normative existence as the degree to which perceptions converge within an environment.

When speculating about how norms are transmitted, interpersonal communication is an important starting point (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Lapinski and Rimal (2005) argued that communication should moderate the potential influence of norms. Specifically, making norms more overt through interpersonal communication should foster more consistent perceptions of the norms in that environment. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 states:

Interpersonal political communication should influence perceptions of political descriptive norms on college campuses such that as political communication increases the reporting of descriptive norms should a) converge more with other in-group members, and b) increase.

There is reason to believe that people use environmental cues as guides to their behavior. Social norm campaigns have found that when messages are believable, the target audience adjusts their behavior to be consistent with the message (Smith, Atkin, Martell, Allen, & Hembroff, 2006). Field studies have noted that normative perceptions of others drinking behavior was predictive of personal drinking (Rimal & Real, 2003, 2005). Additionally, experimental designs (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1990; Gerber & Rogers, 2009) have found people use environmental cues when deciding whether to engage in behaviors such as littering and voting. The important relationship tested here is whether group-level perceptions of political norms positively relate to political participation without campaign intervention or experimental manipulation. This link is the crux of the social norm approach. *The final hypothesis argues that a positive correlation should exist between the reporting of descriptive political norms and political participation.*

Method

Participants

Participants included 1,389 students at 32 college campuses across the United States. The sample size for each campus is reported in Table 1. The mean age of the sample was 20.95 ($SD = 3.13$), and included 843 females and 508 males, with 38 responses missing. The sample had an average of 3.16 years of college education ($SD = 1.08$). This sample was 70.3% White, 6.9% Hispanic, 6.8% African American, 6.6% Asian, and 1.4% Middle Eastern. The remaining 3.8% was comprised of students reporting, Native American, multiracial, Caribbean, Pacific Islander, or "other" ethnicities. Approximately 4.2% of students did not report their ethnicity.

Procedure

Campus selection

E-mails were sent out to 71 faculty or graduate students at different colleges or universities who were friends or acquaintances of the researchers. The request in the E-mail was standardized and asked whether the person would be willing to collect data for this study. In return for their assistance, those solicited were told a similar favor could be returned to them in the future. After this request 48 colleagues agreed to collect data, resulting in a 67.7% response rate. Eight faculty members, however, were unable to administer the data for various reasons resulting in a total of 40 schools (56% response rate). Schools that had a sample size of 20 or less were dropped ($k = 8$), leaving a total of 32 schools participating. Though not a random sample of colleges, the sampling frame was diverse in terms of school size (6 classified as small, 7 medium, and 19 large), geographic location (12 from midwestern states, 4 northeastern, 10 southern, 6 western), public ($k = 24$) and private institutions ($k = 8$), and campus location (13 urban, 16 suburban, 3 rural). Additionally, the sample consisted of students from over 30 different majors, which reflects the

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Normative Perceptions and Political Behaviors on Each College Campus

College	<i>n</i>	General Norm Perceptions	Ideological Perceptions	Political Behavior Perceptions	Actual Reported Ideology	Actual Political Behavior Index
Albion College	28	4.43 (1.40)	3.04 (1.28)	31.39 (9.55)	3.95 (1.46)	4.54 (2.55)
Bryant University	52	4.23 (1.32)	4.21 (1.46)	27.81 (11.33)	3.02 (1.53)	4.56 (1.61)
Cal State Long Beach	45	5.16 (1.17)	2.71 (0.99)	35.76 (13.23)	3.33 (1.41)	4.84 (2.12)
Cornell University	60	5.60 (1.41)	2.55 (1.06)	34.15 (13.42)	3.32 (1.32)	4.54 (2.20)
DePaul University	32	5.45 (1.64)	2.75 (1.34)	34.78 (11.42)	3.41 (1.66)	5.00 (2.13)
East Tenn State University	20	4.45 (1.21)	4.10 (1.17)	32.94 (12.51)	3.70 (1.34)	4.65 (1.98)
Henderson State University	50	4.10 (1.40)	3.95 (0.87)	28.56 (14.30)	3.70 (1.43)	3.60 (2.44)
Kansas State	35	4.46 (0.82)	4.76 (1.28)	28.91 (15.21)	4.37 (1.63)	4.26 (1.87)
Louisiana State University	49	4.88 (1.17)	4.69 (1.42)	29.67 (13.70)	4.60 (1.53)	4.02 (1.93)
Michigan State University	58	5.83 (1.06)	2.95 (1.05)	37.70 (14.19)	3.77 (1.55)	4.13 (2.56)
Northern Illinois University	21	4.47 (1.14)	3.33 (1.11)	25.50 (12.47)	3.38 (1.63)	3.52 (1.91)
Oakland University	20	4.66 (1.11)	3.50 (0.89)	30.61 (13.09)	4.35 (1.60)	4.00 (2.45)
Penn State University	108	5.66 (1.22)	3.19 (1.01)	36.93 (14.28)	3.85 (1.72)	4.77 (2.20)
San Diego State University	86	4.68 (1.27)	2.70 (1.04)	30.12 (15.16)	3.22 (1.57)	4.87 (2.57)
St. Norberts College	49	4.85 (1.35)	3.95 (1.36)	33.02 (11.52)	4.11 (1.45)	5.60 (2.26)
Stanford University	23	6.47 (1.73)	2.39 (0.89)	40.85 (13.29)	3.17 (1.30)	5.52 (2.83)
SUNY-Buffalo	36	5.18 (1.29)	3.49 (1.04)	34.21 (15.44)	3.50 (1.06)	3.42 (1.64)
Texas State	31	4.48 (1.06)	3.84 (0.93)	31.78 (14.34)	4.20 (1.49)	4.00 (2.55)
Texas Tech	36	4.68 (1.22)	5.22 (1.15)	27.54 (10.84)	4.75 (1.57)	4.06 (2.06)
University of Georgia	37	5.11 (1.32)	4.06 (1.33)	30.19 (13.37)	4.24 (1.96)	5.43 (2.08)
University of Hawaii	53	4.01 (1.10)	2.87 (1.19)	31.08 (20.17)	3.64 (1.53)	4.45 (2.64)
University of Illinois	20	4.87 (0.94)	3.00 (0.97)	37.46 (14.32)	2.69 (1.11)	4.43 (1.65)
University of Kentucky	34	4.92 (1.01)	3.79 (1.15)	29.02 (10.14)	4.15 (1.46)	5.26 (2.00)

Table 1 (*Continued*)

College	<i>n</i>	General Norm Perceptions	Ideological Perceptions	Political Behavior Perceptions	Actual Reported Ideology	Actual Political Behavior Index
University of Miami (FL)	81	5.70 (1.33)	3.00 (1.05)	36.58 (13.20)	3.21 (1.65)	4.09 (2.08)
University of Michigan	35	6.61 (1.22)	2.09 (0.97)	33.45 (15.66)	3.24 (1.53)	4.09 (2.26)
University of Oklahoma	40	4.81 (1.11)	4.20 (1.16)	31.19 (14.57)	4.15 (1.39)	4.95 (2.02)
University of Southern California	53	5.06 (1.02)	3.74 (1.24)	32.28 (12.45)	3.62 (1.35)	4.92 (2.08)
University of Tennessee	23	4.97 (1.20)	4.30 (0.88)	35.36 (14.02)	3.43 (1.88)	5.30 (1.40)
University of Washington	37	6.19 (0.86)	2.11 (0.99)	36.96 (14.23)	3.56 (1.27)	4.76 (1.67)
Wayne State University	50	4.42 (1.09)	3.14 (1.13)	28.41 (13.36)	3.32 (1.43)	3.20 (2.06)
William Paterson University	35	4.38 (1.56)	2.94 (0.91)	33.37 (13.80)	2.74 (1.46)	4.53 (2.08)
Young Harris College	39	4.22 (1.12)	4.28 (1.49)	26.03 (12.05)	4.77 (1.80)	3.79 (3.15)

samples' academic diversity. All students, however, were currently enrolled in a communication course.

Data collection

Students were informed of this opportunity through their instructor in February 2009, and were E-mailed a link to an online survey. Surveys took approximately 10 minutes to complete and included 43 items. After filling out the survey, students left their names to receive compensation per instructor's request. Approximately 32 students (2.3% of the valid sample) failed to complete more than half the survey, and were consequently dropped from analyses where they did not complete a scale in its entirety. All measures used for this study can be found in Appendix A.

Measures

Perceptions of political descriptive norms

To measure student perceptions of campus descriptive norms, three different sets of measures were created to represent perceptions of general political characteristics on campus, perceptions of campus ideology, and perceptions of students' political

behaviors. The first scale pertained to descriptive norm measures regarding political characteristics of the university and the average university student, and ranged from 1 (*low perceptions of general political activity*) to 10 (*high*) ($M = 5.01, SD = 1.38, \alpha = .82$). Confirmatory Factor Analysis conducted using PACKAGE software (Hamilton & Hunter, 1988) was used to test model fit. An assessment of the errors surrounding each estimate suggests that overall the error was relatively modest ($e's < .13, RMSE = .073$, Hunter & Gerbing, 1982). Thus this 5-item measure was retained for analyses. A standard 1-item measure adapted from the 1-item, 7-point ideology measure used in the highly validated American National Election Surveys assessed perceptions of campus ideology ($M = 3.41, SD = 1.35$; higher numbers indicate more conservative attitudes). The third set of descriptive norm measures was adapted from previous norm studies (Park & Smith, 2007; Rimal & Real, 2003, 2005). These 11 measures correspond with the political participation measures from Verba et al. (1995), and asked students to report what percentage of the student body they believe has participated in a variety of political participation behaviors. Responses were averaged and ranged from 0 to 100% ($M = 32.39, SD = 13.88, \alpha = .87$). Table 1 contains the campus means for descriptive norm items, ideology items, and political participation behaviors across schools.

Actual political participation and ideology

Political participation measures were taken from Verba et al. (1995). Behaviors were chosen to be representative of the list of behaviors from Verba et al.'s established overall activity index (see Appendix B in Verba et al.), and can be found in Appendix A. A political participation index was created with scores ranging from 0 to 11 ($M = 4.44, SD = 2.26, \alpha = .69$). Actual reported ideology was measured using the same 7-point ideology scale taken from the National Election Studies, and asked students to place themselves along the scale ranging from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*) ($M = 3.69, SD = 1.59$).

Interpersonal political communication

Four items addressed frequency, commonality, and prevalence of political discussions on campus and can be found in Appendix A. All variables were assessed using Hamilton and Hunter's (1988) CFA PACKAGE software. Results supported this 4-item solution ($e's < .07, RMSE = .054, M = 2.78, SD = 1.5 = 49, \text{range } 0.25\text{--}8.75, \alpha = .73$).

Analysis

To assess contextual effects, multilevel modeling is necessary, because conceptually this research is interested in students nested within schools; therefore, hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) was used. For this analysis, the Level 1 (individual level) model included individual's perceptions of political norms, political communication, and political participation behaviors. The Level 2 (context) variables were the campus-level means for norm and communication measures. In

Table 2 Parameter Estimates for the Models Examining Significant Variance Between Schools on Different Measures of Perceptions of Descriptive Political Norms

		General Campus Norms	Campus Ideology	Political Participation Average Norm
Fixed components				
Intercept	γ_{00}	3.88***	3.46***	32.23***
Variance of random components				
	τ_{00}	0.41***	0.59***	8.76***
	σ^2	1.52	1.29	183.78
ICC		.21	0.31	0.05
Reliability		.91	0.94	0.64

Note: ICC = intraclass correlation; HLM = hierarchical linear modeling. These estimates were produced using the HLM one-way ANOVA with random effects model (i.e., null model) with Restricted Likelihood Estimation for the parameters.

*** $p < .001$.

order to build multilevel models, it is imperative to include one variable at a time, and to test fit using deviance measures that indicate whether the inclusion of each variable significantly improves model estimates (Hox, 2002). If this deviance test fails, the model is over specified and that variable should be removed. The building of each model is depicted in the tables. In this section, only the final model will be presented in an effort to enhance clarity in reporting (Table 2).

Results

The first hypothesis stated that mean perceptions of political descriptive norms should significantly vary between college campuses. This hypothesis was tested using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with random effects in the HLM software package (Bryk, Raudenbush, & Congdon, 1996). The first model tested general perceptions of campus norms as the dependent variable, and college campus as the independent variable using Restricted Maximum Likelihood Estimation (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Results indicate that 21% of the variance (ICC; intraclass correlation) is attributable to between-group variance, and is statistically significant ($\chi^2(31) = 385.83, p < .001$). This provides strong evidence consistent with the first hypothesis. The second model tested whether perceptions of campus ideology exhibited similar interdependency. The same model as above was ran and results were statistically significant ($\chi^2(31) = 604.67, p < .001$) with the ICC calculating that 31% of the variance was attributable to between-school differences. The final model tested whether normative perceptions regarding behavioral norms could be predicted using the campus as the independent variable. Results indicate that there was again a significant effect of the campus on perceptions of political

behaviors ($\chi^2(31) = 95.95, p < .001$), with the ICC indicating that 4.5% of the variance is attributable to between-group variation. Regardless of the descriptive norm measure the first hypothesis arguing that norms exist at the group level was supported. Thus, students on the same campus reported similar perceptions to one another, and reported systematically different perceptions from students at other institutions. These findings are summarized in Table 1.

The second hypothesis purported to explain this normative convergence by measuring frequency of political communication on campus. Specifically, it was thought that communication would influence perceptions of political descriptive norms, such that more frequent political communication would increase convergence in the reporting of norms. In order to test the first part of this hypothesis, aggregated data at the campus level were analyzed. Average political communication measures were correlated with variance scores on the normative perceptions scale. This hypothesis would receive support if a negative correlation existed, indicating that as the campus average of political communication increased, the variance surrounding norm perceptions would decrease. Results only approached statistical significance in the predicted direction for the campus ideology measure ($r(30) = -.28, p = .120$). All other tests were not significant.

The second part of the hypothesis argued that on campuses where political communication was more frequent, students at that campus would report that political activity was also more common. Furthermore, students who talk about politics more frequently, and perceive political discussions as being more common, should also perceive that political activity is more typical at their campus. Thus, theoretically and statistically, political communication will be treated as a Level 1 (individual political talk) and Level 2 variable (campus average of political talk). In order to guide its use, each model first included the campus as an independent variable, then the group-level measure of campus political talk was introduced, and finally the individual-level measure was added. If all of these aforementioned models improved estimates, a random component was then added. A variable was removed from the model if its inclusion did not significantly improve model estimates (see Table 3).

The first model tested whether political communication influenced general perceptions of campus norms. On the basis of deviance tests, the most appropriate model to test this relationship was a random effects model, using frequency of political communication as both a Level 1 and Level 2 independent variable. Results reveal that political talk at the campus level had a statistically significant positive association with perceptions of campus norms ($b = 0.24, SE = 0.06, t(30) = 3.68, p < .001$). This finding reveals that on campuses where political talk is more frequent, students at that campus report general political activity as more common among the student body. Additionally, individual-level political talk ($b = 0.20, SE = 0.03, t(31) = 6.29, p < .001$) was also a statistically significant and positive predictor of general norm perceptions. Thus, students who have or perceive more frequent political discussions are also more likely to report that political activity is more typical

Table 3 Parameter Estimates for the Models Examining Significant Variance Between Schools on Different Measures of Perceptions of Descriptive Political Norms

	General Campus Norms			Political Participation Norms			
	Null	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Null	Model 1	Model 2
Fixed components							
Intercept	4.97***	4.65**	4.12***	3.91***	32.23***	30.00***	23.85***
Campus talk		0.16 [#]	0.15 [#]	0.24***		1.06*	1.00*
Individual talk			0.19***	0.20***			2.12***
Variance of random components							
τ_{00}	0.41***	0.37***	0.34***	0.10	8.76***	6.03***	4.73***
τ_{11}				0.01*			
σ^2	1.52	1.52	1.43	1.41	183.78	184.00	171.82
Deviance	4512.90	4508.96	3926.17	3912.65	10892.66	10886.11	9695.99

Note: The null model is included here to demonstrate improvement in the deviance tests (estimated through full likelihood estimation) when additional predictors are added to the model. Also note that when the subscript on the gammas have a number besides zero in the tens spot, a group level variable is being tested, whereas when a number higher than zero is in the ones spot, an individual level predictor has been included. All parameters were estimated using restricted likelihood estimation. The model where a random effect was supported is illustrated by a second measure of tau (τ_{11}) being estimated. A model that specified how political communication affected ideology norms was not analyzed. This is because a hypothesis was not articulated to assess whether frequency of talk related to perceptions of campus liberalism or conservatism. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [#] $p < .01$.

among their peers. Further, the random components from the group-level measure of communication and individual-level communication were strongly and positively correlated ($r(30) = .95, p < .001$). This relationship suggests that on campuses where political talk is common, the relationship between individual political talk and normative perceptions is stronger and more positive. These results provide strong support for Hypothesis 2, which argues that higher frequencies of political communication at the group- and individual-level explain why people perceive political activity as being more typical at their campus.

For the dependent variable measuring political participation behaviors both group- and individual-level political communication were included in a fixed-effects model. There was a positive, statistically significant main effect for group political communication ($b = 1.00, SE = 0.38, t(30) = 2.68, p < .05$) in the predicted direction. Further the individual-level communication measure was also significant ($b = 2.12, SE = 0.26, t(31209) = 8.30, p < .001$). Taken together, these results suggest that one explanation for higher reports of political social norms is interpersonal political communication; specifically, political activity is perceived as more normative on campuses with a higher frequency of political talk. Furthermore, individuals who have political discussions more frequently are also more likely to report higher political norms at their campus. This implies that one way to increase college students' perceptions of social norms is to encourage people to have more informal political discussions. Although this finding confers status on the important role of interpersonal communication in perceptions of social norms, of formative importance is whether people's perceptions of political activity at their campus correspond with actual political activity at that campus.

As such, the purpose of Hypothesis 3 was to understand whether perceptions of norms had any influence on actual political behavior. When testing this hypothesis both individual- and group-level analyses were conducted. At the individual level, *Pearson r* correlations were conducted to test whether normative behavioral perceptions were positively correlated with the political participation index. The purpose of this test was to examine whether the norms-behavior link reported frequently in the literature on social norms was replicated with this data. Results were statistically significant for the participation norms scale ($r(1302) = .12, p < .05$), but not the general political norms scale ($r(1295) = .05, p = .104$). Although at the individual level, results partially support this hypothesis, the dependency of data merits multi-level analysis. In addition to using one's college as a Level 2 predictor, a second Level 2 predictor, campus average of perceptions of political norms, was incorporated in the model predicting the Level 1-dependent variable of interest, actual political participation (see Table 4).

To test this hypothesis a regression with means-as-outcomes fixed-effects model was employed using perceptions of campus norms at the group level as the primary independent variable (Raudenbush & Byrk, 2002). This test assessed whether the group average (college average) for descriptive norm measures predicts an individual's political participation within each college campus. Results from the model

Table 4 Parameter Estimates for the Models Explaining the Relationship Between Political Participation and Actual Ideology at the Individual Level and Perceptions of Campus Norms at the Group Level

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Fixed components					
Intercept	γ_{00}	4.44***	3.88***	4.21***	2.85***
GenNorm	γ_{10}		0.12*		
BehNorm	γ_{20}			0.01	
IdeoNorm	γ_{30}				0.25***
Variance of random components					
	τ_{00}	0.21***	0.17**	0.20***	0.11***
	σ^2	4.89	4.89	4.89	2.34

Note: These estimates were produced using the HLM technique, regression with means-as-outcomes, with restricted likelihood estimation for the parameters. For tests of the ideological norm, individual's actual ideology was the dependent variable, with ideological norms on campus as the independent variable.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

supported the third hypothesis, such that as average perceptions of general campus norms increased, so did the political participation of students on that campus ($b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(30) = 2.04$, $p = .05$). Thus, findings suggest that norms perceived at the group level positively influence behaviors at the individual level. Put differently, campuses with higher political norm means are likely to have a more politically active student body.

The second measure of norms was ideological norms. This model tested whether group-level campus ideology norms predicted the political ideology of students at that university. A regression with means-as-outcomes fixed-effects model revealed that perceptions of campus ideology at the group level were a statistically significant predictor of student's actual political ideology ($b = 0.25$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(30) = 4.95$, $p < .001$). This finding suggests that ideological norms perceived at the group level account for student's individual reporting of their own political ideology.

The next measure of social norms was whether normative perceptions regarding participation behaviors influence actual participation. The same model as above was used to test this hypothesis. The relationship between general norm perceptions at the group level and frequency of political participation at the individual level failed to reach significance ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(30) = 1.20$, $p = .239$) and was not consistent with predictions.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to extend social norm measurement to the group level, and to inform scholarship interested in antecedent factors of political

participation. This research provides preliminary evidence in support of Berelson et al.'s (1954) and Newcomb's (1943) claim made over 50 years ago that group political norms exist, are perceivable, and impact people's political behavior. This study also provides a novel method for testing collective, rather than personal, social norms and supports Lapinski and Rimal's (2005) thinking that collective norms exist and influence behavior. The contribution made by this research design was the ability to vary norms at the group level without sacrificing information at the individual level. Results suggest the continued pursuit of political descriptive norms for formative purposes, while also inspiring questions necessary to advance social norm theory.

Political social norms were assessed in three different ways including: a general assessment of political activity and interest, perceptions of political attitudes (political ideology), and a measure for behavioral perceptions. Interestingly, these norm types functioned in different ways at the group level. The first hypothesis posited that perceptions of social norms would differ between schools. This relationship was strongest for the campus ideology measure ($p = .32$), followed by the general norms measure ($p = .21$). The fact that these measures exhibit an ICC above .20 considerably illustrates the presence of agreed-upon social norms and the need for multilevel analysis. For the behavioral measure the dependency in data, while significant, was weaker ($p = .05$), but should not be overlooked.

One explanation for why behavioral norms were less prone to normative agreement might have been due to the private nature of some participation activities. Lapinski and Rimal (2005) argued that the public-private nature of a behavior should moderate the link between perceptions and behaviors. This is because behaviors enacted in private cannot be directly observed; therefore, perceptions of norms tend to be less accurate, and normative influence tends to be diffused. Verba et al.'s (1995) participation index included some private behaviors (e.g., contacting a politician), and also consisted of several behaviors that, though not private, are relatively anonymous (e.g., voting, attending a rally or protest). Therefore, because some acts are not directly observable, in retrospect it is not surprising that behavioral measures exhibited less dependency than other measures.

Hypothesis 2 argued for the critical role played by interpersonal communication in normative transmission. Without communication, whether direct or indirect, it is difficult to imagine how normative information would pervade individual-level perceptions. The first part of this hypothesis used the group level to set up a conservative test of convergence. For all three measures of norms, there was no association between frequency of communication and normative convergence. One explanation is that there was not enough statistical power to find effects at the group level. Another possibility, suggested by Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence theory is that mass media, not interpersonal communication, may explain normative convergence. Mass media, however, was not measured here, and therefore this relationship remains speculative. Furthermore, although interpersonal communication is often measured by frequency, it is acknowledged that this scale

might not have been refined enough to pick up on the nuanced relationship between perceptions and communication. In the future, a more thorough measure of interpersonal political communication would be preferable.

Hypothesis 2 further predicted a positive relationship between political communication and political social norms. This hypothesis was supported for both Level 1 and Level 2 political communication measures. Campuses that, on average, exhibited more political talk reported that political activity was also more common. Additionally, students who reported higher frequencies of political talk were also more likely to report that political activity is more typical among their peers. These findings suggest that future campaigns should promote interpersonal political communication because increases in communication correspond with perceiving a more political environment.

In this study the importance of contextualizing normative measures was paramount. Once this relationship was confirmed, the next logical step was to examine whether group-level data replicates findings from studies that report at the individual level. Hypothesis 3 advanced that political norms would positively affect an individual's political behaviors. Overall, Hypothesis 3 was supported at the group level when general campus norms predicted individual-level behavior and when perceptions of campus ideology predicted actual ideological leaning. Although not all tests received support, these significant findings should not be underestimated. If only individual-level measures of social norms were included (as they often are), alternative arguments stemming from individual differences become possible. However, because the group-level measures of general campus norms and campus ideology were significant, robust support is offered for the influence of collective political social norms on individuals' behavioral and attitudinal decisions.

The social norms approach (Berkowitz, 2004) is sometimes considered an atheoretical campaign tool designed for strategic purposes only. This research contends that relegating social norms to an atheoretical role underestimates its subsistence as a legitimate empirical construct. This study received significant support for normative propositions without experimental manipulation or campaign intervention, and using group-level data. This suggests that given the magnitude of contextual effects on normative perceptions, the abundance of research that has reported robust significant effects by studying norms in just one environment is likely underreporting the effect size of normative influence. Put another way, in one environment contextual norms are controlled by design, allowing variability to only be attributable to individual differences. This research puts forth that allowing Level 1 and Level 2 processes to vary will likely reveal larger and more substantial relationships between norms and behavior than currently represented in the literature. This denotes a significant advancement in our understanding of how norms operate.

Although there is value in description, there are also limitations that extend from this pursuit. One limitation inherent in a study of this scope was the lack of control over several extraneous factors. Students' major, how a student was solicited, their motivations for taking the survey were all to a certain extent out of the control of the

lead researchers. Although these limitations are acknowledged, in the preliminary steps of this study they were carefully weighed against the benefits of getting a diverse sample frame. Another limitation of this study was focusing on only the college population, admittedly a small and specialized group, at the cost of including a more nationally representative sample. A nationally representative sample would have been preferable from both a generalizability standpoint and because college students tend to be relatively apolitical compared to the general population, however, given the theoretical focus of this project, these costs were sacrificed in the short term for a more controlled research design.

The purpose of this investigation was to better understand how environments influence individual behavior. This research evinced that environments have distinct political social norms that, to some degree, explain the political activity of students in that environment. Participatory democratic theory (Dewey, 1954 [1927]) maintains that a democracy will best function when its citizens are educated and knowledgeably involved in the political process. This study illuminates a potential strategy to increase students' civic engagement by using their educational institution as a conduit for normative influence through social norm campaigns and interpersonal discussion.

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Appendix A

Political Communication Scale

1. In a given week, how many political conversations do you think the average student at your university engages in? conversations/week
2. In a given week, how many political conversations do you overhear between other students at your university? conversations/week
3. At your university, how common are political discussions? (1) Very rare, (7) Very common
4. In a given week, how many political conversations do you engage in? ___ conversations/week

General Campus Norms Scale

1. On a scale from 1 (*not at all active*) to 10 (*very active*), how politically active would you rate your university?
2. On a scale from 1 (*much less active*) to 10 (*much more active*), how politically active would you rate your university compared to other universities?
3. On a scale from 1 (*not at all interested*) to 10 (*very interested*) how politically interested would you rate the average student at your university?
4. Compared to other universities, do you think your university has 1 (*far fewer*) to 10 (*far more*) political events on campus?
5. What percentage of the student body would you consider to be politically active? (divided by 10 for this scale to keep the same 1–10 metric)

Campus Ideology

1. Where would you place your university on this scale? 1 (*Very liberal*)–4 (*Moderate*)–7 (*Very conservative*)

Political Participation

Norms prompt: What percentage of the student body do you think:

Political participation prompt: Have you ever: (0 if no, 1 if yes)

1. Voted in the last National election?
2. Has voted in local elections?
3. Worked on the 2008 Presidential campaign?
4. Worked on a 07–08 Primary campaign?
5. Has attended a political rally?
6. Has participated in a political protest?
7. Has signed a petition?
8. Has visited a campaign website?
9. Is involved in a University-sponsored political organization?
10. Has contacted a politician?
11. Is a member of at least 1 University organization?

Une exploration des normes sociales en tant que phénomène au niveau du groupe : les normes de participation politique existent-elles et influencent-elles la participation politique sur les campus universitaires?

Hillary C. Shulman

Cette étude explore l'association entre les normes politiques sur les campus et la participation politique des étudiants. Cette étude conceptualise les normes comme étant un construit au niveau du groupe en recueillant des données dans plusieurs universités (K=32 universités, n=1389 étudiants) où les normes varient sans intervention de campagne. Une modélisation multiniveau révèle que les perceptions des normes politiques convergent au sein des universités. De plus, la fréquence des communications politiques au niveau du groupe et au niveau de l'individu expliquent les hausses dans les perceptions normatives. Cette augmentation est significative parce que les normes au niveau du groupe permettaient de prévoir les comportements politiques au niveau individuel. Cette étude documente l'existence de normes politiques au-delà du niveau d'analyse individuel et souligne le rôle important des normes politiques, de la communication politique et du contexte social pour comprendre la participation politique.

Mots clés : normes sociales, participation politique, modélisation multiniveau, opinion publique, communication politique

Soziale Normen als Phänomen auf Gruppenebene: Existieren Normen der politischen Teilhabe und beeinflussen diese politische Partizipation auf dem Universitätscampus?

Diese Forschungsarbeit untersucht die Beziehung zwischen den politischen Normen auf dem Campus und der politischen Partizipation unter Studierenden. Diese Studie konzeptualisiert Normen als ein Konstrukt auf Gruppenebene, indem Daten an verschiedenen Universitäten (K=32 Universitäten, n=1.389 Studierende) erhoben wurden, an denen Normen ohne eine Kampagnenintervention variierten. Mehrebenenmodellierung zeigt, dass sich die Wahrnehmung von politischen Normen innerhalb der Universitäten ähnelt. Außerdem erklären die Häufigkeit der politischen Kommunikation auf Gruppen- und Individualebene Zuwächse in normativen Wahrnehmungen. Dieser Zuwachs ist bedeutungsvoll, weil Normen auf der Gruppenebene politisches Verhalten auf der Individualebene vorhersagten. Diese Forschungsarbeit dokumentiert die Existenz politischer Normen jenseits der Individualebene als Analyseebene und betont die Bedeutung von politischen Normen, politischer Kommunikation und sozialem Kontext für die Auseinandersetzung mit politischer Partizipation.

Schlüsselbegriffe: soziale Normen, politische Partizipation, Mehrebenenmodellierung, Öffentliche Meinung, politische Kommunikation

Explorando las Normas Sociales como un Fenómeno a Nivel Grupal: Existen las Normas de Participación Política e Influencian la Participación Política en los Campus Universitarios?

Resumen

Esta investigación explora la relación entre las normas políticas del campus y la participación política estudiantil. Este estudio conceptualiza a las normas sociales como un constructor a nivel grupal mediante la colección de datos en varias universidades (K=32 universidades, n=1,389 estudiantes) donde las normas variaron sin la campaña de intervención. El modelo multinivel revela que las percepciones de las normas políticas convergen dentro de las universidades. Más aún, la frecuencia de la comunicación política a nivel grupal e individual explica los incrementos de las percepciones normativas. Este incremento es significativo porque las normas a nivel grupal predijeron los comportamientos políticos a nivel individual. Esta investigación documenta la existencia de normas políticas más allá del análisis a nivel individual y subraya la importancia del rol de las normas políticas, la comunicación política, y el contexto social en el entendimiento de la participación política.

Palabras Claves: Normas sociales, Participación política, Modelo multinivel, Opinión pública, Comunicación política