

Visual Imagery Technique Boosts Voting, Study Finds

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Registered voters who used a simple visual imagery technique the evening before the 2004 election were significantly more likely to vote the next day, a new study found. It was all a matter of the visual perspective people took when they imagined themselves voting.

Researchers asked some Ohio college students to picture themselves voting the next day from a third-person perspective – as if they were observers viewing their own actions. Others were told to picture themselves voting in a first-person perspective, through their own eyes.

A full 90 percent of those who pictured themselves voting from a third-person visual perspective reported later that they did indeed vote, compared to only 72 percent who took the first-person viewpoint.

“When participants saw themselves as others would, they were more motivated to actually get out and vote,” said Lisa Libby, co-author of the study and assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State University.

“They saw themselves as more likely to vote and that translated into action.

“The strength of the results were particularly noteworthy given that the experiment was conducted in Ohio during the 2004 election, when there were unprecedented efforts to mobilize voter turnout in a crucial swing state,” she said.

Libby conducted the study with Eric Shaeffer and Jonathan Slemmer from Ohio State and Richard Eibach, assistant professor of psychology at Williams College.

Their results will appear in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*.

The study involved 146 Ohio State students, all of

whom were registered voters.

On the evening of Nov. 1, 2004 those who agreed to participate responded to an online questionnaire. They were told to picture themselves voting in the next day's presidential election, some using a first-person and some using a third-person visual perspective.

They were then asked a series of questions designed to assess their self-perceptions as voters. For example, they were asked how personally important it was to vote in the next day's election, how much their vote would make a difference, and how much they would regret if they did not vote and their candidate lost.

They were also asked how likely it was they would vote if they faced several potential deterrents, such as a 20-minute wait in line to vote.

Several weeks later, they responded to an online survey which asked if they had voted.

Libby said she was surprised by just how much the difference in perspectives affected voter turnout among this sample. “It was a large effect, especially given all the other factors going on in the 2004 election in Ohio,” she said.

The third-person voting boost was similar among those who said they supported George Bush and those who said they supported John Kerry.

The reason visual perspective is so important has to do with how people think of their own actions versus how they view the actions of others, Libby said.

People tend to think of their own actions in terms of the situation, and believe they are adaptable depending on circumstances. For instance, a person may say he didn't vote because he was very busy at that time, or couldn't find a ride to the

polling site.

But when they view the actions of others, people tend to explain behavior in terms of a person's personality and character.

“When we think of others, we think of them having these traits that are constant across situations,” Libby said.

For example, a person may believe someone else didn't vote because he or she is lazy, or isn't interested in politics.

So, in this study, when people pictured themselves voting in the third-person, they judged themselves as they thought others would.

“By taking a third-person visual perspective, they saw themselves as the kind of a person who would overcome obstacles and vote in this election,” Libby said. “And that translated into them actually going to the polls.”

Libby has done several studies examining how using the third-person visual perspective can help people achieve goals, and has plans to continue this line of research.

“We're interested in the challenge people face in following through on their good intentions,” she said. “Many people say they want to exercise more, or vote, or do other things they know are good, but have a problem following through.

“Picturing yourself in the third-person, from an outsider's perspective, can help people follow through on their goals.”

Source: Ohio State University

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