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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Story incentive: the effect of national stories on voter turnout

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Abstract

This article contends that an important driver of turnout is the national stories embraced by citizens. We suggest the notion of ‘story incentive,’ whereby adopting a group’s story components – those that connect the past, the future, and prominent national characters – motivates individuals to participate in that group’s political activities. Leaning on narrative theories and studies on voter turnout, we develop and test hypotheses regarding the effect of story components on the likelihood of voting. Our measurements of story incentives are based on election surveys and encompass Denmark, Israel, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US. The results support the main story-incentive hypothesis. We discuss the theoretical ramifications of the connection between adherence to national stories and voter turnout.

Keywords: narrative theory; national stories; voting behavior; turnout

Introduction

Participation in elections is one of the most meaningful tools available to citizens of modern democracies. Yet, a single vote rarely makes a difference in any country, irrespective of the nature of its electoral system. Anthony Downs formulated what has become known as the ‘paradox of voting’ (Downs, 1957) along the following lines: Despite their chances of influencing the final outcome being infinitesimally small, individuals still turn out to vote. This dilemma is addressed in a large and growing body of research (Blais, 2006, 2007). Among the explanatory factors suggested are the role of external influences (e.g., social networks: Hopmann, 2012; social pressures: Gerber et al., 2008; media content: Schuck et al., 2016); and internal motivations (e.g., interest in politics: Miller et al., 1996).

There remain, however, major gaps in our understanding of what drives turnout. Blais (2007) argues in this regard that the challenge is to account for the reason voters think that they have an obligation to vote, even though their individual vote is unlikely to influence the outcome. This paper addresses the issue by integrating narrative theory as a new type of explanation for turnout. In line with the narrative policy framework, which calls for ‘a quantitative, structuralist, and positivist approach to the study of policy narrative’ (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 330; Jones, Shanahan & McBeth, 2014; see also Jones & Radaelli, 2015), we suggest that story components can *incentivize* the likelihood of voting and empirically test this hypothesis. The rationale is that embracing a group’s story components will incentivize individuals to take part in that group’s political activities.

We therefore add to previous attempts to connect between perceptions of national identity and their social and political ramifications. Previous theoretical work points to the possible political benefits of national attachments, for instance, in encouraging social solidarity among various groups within the nation (e.g., Kymlicka, 2015; Tamir, 2019). Such social aspects of nationalism can offset current threats to democracies, notably the rise of populist movements or internal political cleavages (Gustavsson & Miller, 2020). The political and social advantages arising from national attachments are corroborated by a large body of empirical evidence, which shows that such sentiments can increase the involvement in the democratic process (Huddy & Khatib, 2007), ease inter-group hostility (Levendusky, 2018), reduce tax frauds (Chan, 2019), and in some cases, encourage social and political trust (Gustavsson & Stendahl, 2020) and support for the welfare state (Johnston *et al.*, 2010). However, while research hitherto has focused primarily on the strength of individuals' attachment to their nation, we explore the subjective meanings that national affinity entails for individuals and the consequences of such notions for voter turnout.

This paper includes three main parts. First, we establish the idea of story incentive theoretically and propose an empirical method for its analysis. We argue that an account of voting turnout in terms of story incentive rests on the assumption that the likelihood to vote in national elections is higher amongst individuals who embrace story components of the nation. Second, based on election surveys from four parliamentary political systems (Denmark, Israel, the Netherlands, and the UK) and one presidential system (the US), we derive evidence for the relationship between story incentive and voter turnout, thereby validating an additional explanatory parameter above and beyond known explanations. In the concluding section, we discuss the theoretical implications of our findings.

Story and politics

Human beings are essentially storytelling creatures (MacIntyre, 1981). Narrating is a natural impulse, and the narrative mode of thought and expression is a fundamental dimension in human life (e.g., MacIntyre, 1981; Carrithers, 1991; McAdams, 1993; Shenhav, 2015). A narrative is often taken to be 'a primary means by which individuals organize, process, and convey information' (Jones & McBeth, 2010: 330), created and used, *inter alia*, 'to interpret and understand the political realities around us' (Patterson & Monroe, 1998: 315).

The centrality of narratives for people can be encapsulated in the concept of 'narrative identity' (e.g., Somers & Gibson, 1994; Hammack, 2008; McAdams & McLean, 2013). From a psychological perspective, narrative identity is defined as 'the accumulating knowledge that emerges from reasoning about our narrative memories' and 'yields a life story schema that provides causal, temporal, and thematic coherence to an overall sense of identity' (Singer, 2004: 442).

The concept of 'story' is a core element in narrative theory. Various scholars often use the terms 'story' and 'narrative' interchangeably (Spector-Mersel, 2010). However, in narratology, they are usually differentiated (Herman, 2009). 'While *story* refers to what is being told, or the "tale", *narrative* alludes more broadly to the act of "narrating", encompassing not only the tale but also the text and its narration' (Shenhav, 2015: 6, emphasis added). Despite differences in views regarding the conceptual definition of 'story', an accepted narratological approach requires a story to contain at least two chronologically related events, either real or fictive (Prince, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002 [1983]). While stories usually involve more than two events, the above basic requirement allows temporal continuity, inherent to the notion of 'sequence'. In keeping with this perspective, which highlights a *succession* of events (e.g., Jaworski & Coupland, 1999; Herman, 2009), the operational definition of 'story' used here is as 'the chronological sequence of events derived from a narrative, as well as the characters involved in them' (Shenhav, 2015: 16). One of the reasons for including characters into the above minimal definition of 'story' is that they carry considerable weight in political stories (e.g., Shanahan, Jones & McBeth, 2011).

Since we are interested in voter turnout, we chose to focus on a special type of stories, *national stories* – the ones that are about a nation and are also embraced or shared by its people and/or elites. Accordingly, and in light of our operational definition of ‘story’ as a proxy emphasizing key elements of the national story espoused by each respondent and in line with previous research (Sheafer et al., 2011; Shenhav et al., 2014), we use the concatenation of the most important past event, future event, and national character as our tested story components. To define the national story components prevalent in a given society, we aggregate the components of individuals’ national stories (past, future, and character). We argue that such collective stories have a substantial impact on individuals’ political behavior, and specifically, on their willingness to engage in the fundamental political act of voting. It is this kind of impact that is termed here *story incentive*. While for the use of surveys we adopt a ‘thin level’ of narrative analysis (Shenhav, 2015), it is fair to assume that the stories components we capture are proxies of narratives respondents were exposed to in the social domain in the broader and richer sense of the concept.

The present study contributes to research on voter turnout by developing this line of reasoning while utilizing narrative approaches, as part of a growing trend of investigating narratives in the political domain (e.g., Patterson & Monroe, 1998). This interest is evidenced in recent attempts to incorporate narrative approaches into empirical political studies, such as policy studies (Jones, et al., 2014); national security (Krebs, 2015a); voting behavior (Sheafer, et al., 2011); coalition formation (Shenhav, et al., 2014); environment policy (Lejano, et al., 2013); rhetoric (Hammer, 2010), and conflicts and their resolutions (Bar-Tal, 2000).

Story incentive

The idea that stories provide an incentive for voting and thus affect turnout rests upon narratives’ communal function, in the sense that they help us ‘make sense of our reality and understand ourselves as political beings’ (Patterson & Monroe, 1998: 315). Stories can connect people across generations and places (Carrithers, 1991). They serve to synchronize the ‘individual’s life cycle with that of a group’ (Shenhav, 2015: 2; see also Carrithers, 1991) by creating a sense of familiarity and emotional attachments between people who live in different places and even at different times (e.g., Zerubavel, 1995; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). If stories play such an important role in the creation and consolidation of groups, it stands to reason that those who embrace a group’s story will be more likely to participate in that group’s collective activities – in our case, voting on Election Day – than those who do not.

We suggest two mechanisms to account for the effect of national stories on voter turnout. These mechanisms are related to intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of voting (see e.g., Gerber et al., 2008). The intrinsic mechanism conceives of voting as an expressive act that represents citizens’ concern for their community (see Coleman, 2013; Blais & Achen, 2019) and allows them to communicate their sense of group belonging to others (Schatz & Lavine, 2007). As a symbolic depiction of a nation, our story components can ‘essentialize the group as a transcendent psychological entity, one that connects the individual to larger meaning and purpose’ (Schatz & Lavine, 2007, p. 333). Embracing national story components, in and of itself, enhances one’s commitment to the nation, and ‘uniquely accentuate citizens’ identification as national members’ (Schatz & Lavine, 2007, p. 332; see Carrithers, 1991). It is the presence of a national story in a person’s mind that fosters meaningful group belonging. Since social stories generally arouse the feeling of ‘groupness’ (Shenhav, 2015), those who embrace a group’s story are more likely to care for that group, connect to its history, and feel responsible for its future (see also Miller, 1995). Therefore, those who embrace components of national stories may use the act of voting to express their commitment and care for the group.¹

¹Embracing national stories can potentially lead to feelings of excitement derived from the act of voting, especially when a person perceives that her vote can make a difference in impacting the community’s future (Duffy & Tavits, 2008), such as in close elections (Kam & Utych, 2011). We encourage future studies to examine this issue.

The extrinsic mechanism relates to the social pressures associated with not voting. Embracing group stories not only has the potential to enhance the emotional benefits an individual derives from being part of a wider community but may also increase the fear of social disapproval. Previous studies find that, when individuals believe their social networks will disapprove of the act of not voting, they will be more likely to vote in order to meet the norms of their political community and thus to avoid social isolation (Gerber *et al.*, 2008; Panagopoulos, 2010; Abrams *et al.*, 2011). We expect these social costs to be perceived as more severe among those embracing national stories.² This is because voting is widely acknowledged as an important civic duty (Blais & Achen, 2019). People are expected to project this positive social norm to other community members, as individuals attribute positive characteristics to their fellow in-group members (e.g., Mummendey *et al.*, 2000; Iyengar *et al.*, 2012; Rothschild *et al.*, 2019). As community attachment increases conformity with its norms (Huddy & Khatib, 2007; Turner *et al.*, 1987; Jetten *et al.*, 1997), we expect that citizens who embrace national stories will be more deterred by group isolation (Nachmias, 1974; Marques *et al.*, 1988; Panagopoulos, 2010), and thus will be more likely to vote.

The two mechanisms suggested above for the impact of story incentive are anchored in the assumption that voting is crucial to maintaining an individual's standing in a national community. In this context, a central parameter that is likely to affect voter turnout is the *completeness of the national story*. We take an individual's national story to be 'complete' if, when asked directly about her nation, she incorporates three story components: past, future, and a prominent national character. We posit that embracing a more complete story endows an individual with a narrative identity and incentivizes her to participate in that nation's political activities. For example, we consider a person who depicts the nation only through a major past event (e.g., September 11 in the US context), but omits a prospect for its future and a central character in the nation's history, as one whose national story is incomplete (this person has only one component). In contrast, a person whose view of the nation incorporates all three components (e.g., September 11 as the past event; better economic climate as a desired future for the nation; and Abraham Lincoln as the most important character in the nation's history) is regarded as embracing a complete national story. We therefore predict that such a person is more likely to vote.

If narrative identity does indeed play an important role in shaping one's life trajectory, the lack of this dimension must necessarily divest one's political identity of an important facet. A prominent advocate of this approach is political philosopher Michael Sandel (1996), who expressed concern about what he called a 'storyless condition': '[T]he loss of the capacity for narrative would amount to the ultimate disempowering of the human subject, for without narrative there is no continuity between present and past, and therefore no possibility of acting together to govern ourselves' (p. 351). To apply Sandel's argument to the case in hand, in default of a national story, the act of voting may lose some of its symbolic, community-derived meanings. The upshot is that individuals who do not embrace a complete national story may be demotivated to participate in national elections. Put simply, they will be less likely to vote.

Story incentive, then, can be seen as a force that propels citizens to take part in national narration, in line with Coleman's (2013) thesis that voting is not solely an expression of preference for certain policies or ideologies but also a performative act that affords voters a symbolic opportunity to become part of their nation. If, by voting, citizens actually participate in the creation of their national story, the act of voting can be perceived as a symbolic juncture between past and future. From this perspective, for individuals lacking important components of national stories – such as national past, future, and characters – the act of voting could be less meaningful, in that it is essentially a crossroads of missing elements.

²National stories and national attachments are, of course, not the only explanation for fear of social costs incurred through not voting. Studies find, for example, that citizens will conform more readily to social norms if they expect their behavior will be made public (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Gerber *et al.*, 2008) or when they belong to smaller communities (Kropf & Knack, 2003).

To sum, our main hypothesis predicts that embracing a national story will be positively correlated with the likelihood of voting. Those who have adopted a more complete national story are expected to feel a greater responsibility for the nation and appreciate more deeply the symbolic significance of the act of voting.

HYPOTHESIS 1 (The National Story Completeness Hypothesis): The more components of a national story a voter embraces, the more likely he or she is to vote.

While story incentive is assumed to be contingent on the extent to which a person embraces any one national story, we also assume that electoral participation can be accounted for by the type of the story adopted. More specifically, we posit that adherence to the nation's *central* story components – those consisting of the most popular components of past, future, and character (see Online Appendix B) – will be associated with a higher likelihood of voting, compared to that among individuals who embrace uncommon stories or lack components of national stories. Accordingly, a closer association with one of the most popular stories (e.g., in the US, September 11 as the past event; better economy as the desired future, and Abraham Lincoln as the character), rather than with uncommon ones (e.g., landing on the moon as the past event; changes in energy policy as the future prospect; and Thomas Edison as the character), might indicate that the person perceives herself as standing at the nation's pivotal crossroads between past and future, and therefore feels a stronger duty to impact its future – a commitment which is symbolized by the act of voting. This expectation is further reinforced by the notion of dominant stories, defined as stories that are 'embraced by a group and which its members consider normal or desirable or perceive as compulsory' (Shenhav, 2015). Indeed, central stories are apt to be taken as par for the course, or as a commonsensical way of perceiving political reality (Krebs, 2015a, 2015b). While central stories are not necessarily *dominant* in the theoretical sense described above, it stands to reason that their centrality in a given society warrants at least some expectations formulated theoretically in regard to the notion of dominant stories or the idea of 'master narratives' (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2015). This rationale is also in line with the 'compulsory nature' and 'ubiquity' of master narratives (McLean & Syed, 2015) and with MacKinnon's argument (1996: 235) that dominant narratives 'are not called stories' but rather 'reality'. Consequently, those who embrace central stories are more likely to see the nation as a 'natural' group of belonging that is worth one's time and effort investment. Since, as already stated, voting is widely accepted as a citizen's duty as well as a social norm (Gerber et al., 2008; Blais & Achen, 2019), by following this rule, the person will avoid social disapproval and increase her standing in the group. From this perspective, embracing mainstream stories of a political community is tantamount to adhering to its mainstream norms and dominant goals and will thus decrease political isolation (Nachmias, 1974). We note that eschewing any type of national story component will have a more dramatic effect on the likelihood of voting than embracing uncommon stories, as the former could be an indication of apathy or even alienation, while the latter may point to recalcitrance or reluctance to march in step. One's offstream position vis-à-vis the central national narrative could detract from one's motivation to be politically active, albeit not as drastically as total indifference.

However, along with the expectation that adherence to the nation's central story components will be associated with a higher likelihood of voting, narrative theory can also offer an opposite prediction. In the case in point, those embracing uncommon stories will tend to vote more than those embracing common ones. This rationale follows the idea of 'counter-narratives' (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004) or 'competing stories', which emphasizes the 'struggle between stories for hegemony or control' (Shenhav, 2015, p. 78). Accordingly, as part of their effort to legitimize the alternative story or even in an attempt to change the group's master narrative, individuals that hold uncommon stories will be more motivated to vote.

To sum up, our second hypothesis states that the more components of an individual's national story are shared with the central national stories, the greater the likelihood that she or he will vote. We must keep in mind, however, that the coordinates of this expectation within narrative theory are not clearly defined due to the counter-narrative effect.

HYPOTHESIS 2 (The Story Centrality Hypothesis): The greater the proximity of a citizen's national story to the respective society's central stories, the greater his or her likelihood of voting.

At this point, it is important to address the relationship between *story incentive* and *national identity* in connection to voter turnout. While scholars emphasize the multi-dimensional nature of national identity, the focus is usually put on the strength of national attachment, be it in terms of national cohesion, national pride, or chauvinism (Huddy & del Ponte, 2019; Gustavsson & Stendahl, 2020). These dimensions are employed to gauge self-reported strength of relatedness with the nation (e.g., the extent to which individuals are emotionally close to their nation). Crucially, however, national stories constitute another distinctive facet of the general concept of national identity, tapping perceptions of what the nation is, in terms of key events and characters. In other words, at issue is not the extent to which people are attached to their nation, but rather the presence or the lack of an array of contents, or 'scripts' (Singer, 2004; see also Schank & Abelson, 1977), individuals might conceive of when thinking about the nation (see also Schatz & Lavine, 2007). It is important to separate the strength of people's sense of national identity and its subjective meaning to citizens (Gustavsson & Stendahl, 2020). This distinction is essential since it may entail different political consequences such as policy support and inter-group relations (Huddy, 2001; Transue, 2007).

Specifically, in our context, individuals with higher levels of national attachment do not automatically hold a 'complete' national story (one that includes all three components: past, future, and actor). Their strong attachments to the nation can be a result of other factors, such as satisfaction with the country's economy (Meier-Pesti & Kirchler, 2003) or age (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). Therefore, the effect of the completeness of a national story on turnout is expected to be above and beyond the effect of national attachment (for empirical support for this expectation, see the Results section).

Moreover, the concept of central national stories incorporates a substantively different aspect of one's relationship with the nation. For example, two compatriots who are strongly attached with their nation might assign this group two completely different meanings (Huddy, 2001), and therefore embrace different national stories: one will regard September 11 (a more central past event in the US context) as the defining past event in the history of the American nation, while the other will consider it to be the landing on the moon (a less central event).

Method

Data were obtained from election surveys in Denmark, Israel, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US. These countries were chosen because they are all developed democracies, but differ in their political systems (presidential and parliamentary democracies) as well as their electoral systems and district magnitude (e.g., extreme proportionality in Israel and the Netherlands or single-member plurality systems in the UK and the US). This variation across the countries sampled makes it possible to extrapolate the results to other developed democracies and draw general inferences regarding the relationship between national stories and voter turnout.

All surveys were administered in the respondents' native language and incorporated items on a wide set of issues, including story-related questions.³ The Danish survey ($N = 1000$) was

³In Denmark, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US, surveys were conducted online while in Israel by phone.

conducted during the 2015 parliamentary elections; the Israeli survey ($N = 1292$) – during the 2013 parliamentary elections; the Dutch survey ($N = 1455$) – during the 2012 parliamentary elections; the UK survey ($N = 1002$) – during the 2015 parliamentary elections; the US survey ($N = 1001$) – during the 2016 presidential elections.

The dependent variable: voter turnout

We measured voter turnout by asking respondents if they (1) will definitely vote, (2) will probably vote, (3) do not think they will vote, or (4) will definitely not vote. A definite intention to vote was coded as ‘1’ and all other responses as ‘0’. In the Netherlands, the response options were (1) Yes, I will cast a vote; (2) No, I will not cast a vote; (3) I do not know yet; and (4) I am not eligible to vote (these respondents were excluded from the analysis). The final turnout variable in the Netherlands was coded such that 1 represented ‘I will cast a vote’ and 0 represented all other responses. Online Appendix A provides the descriptive statistics for the main dependent variable and the independent variables.

The independent variable: national story

The independent variable was constructed in two separate steps: first, we identified the full list of events and characters in each country, and then we constructed the story variables.

Identifying the full list of events and characters

National stories have been previously used in investigations of voting behavior and coalition formation by Sheafer et al. (2011), as well as by Shenhav and colleagues (2014). These studies presented respondents with a closed list of major past and possible future national events and asked them to choose the most important item in each category.⁴ Such an approach placed certain constraints on respondents, who had to choose from a limited set of possibilities. By contrast, in the present study, our proxy for national stories is based on open-ended questions, including an item targeting a major historical character. Specifically, participants answered three open-ended questions:

Past Event: When you think about the history of [country] and [the designation for its people, that is, American, British, Danish, Dutch, and Israeli], which *past event* do you consider to be the most important?

Future Event or Prospect: When you think about the prospects of [country] and [designation for its people], which *future event* do you wish to see?

Character: If you have to name one person who is most significant for [country] and the [designation for its people] from early history until today, who would that person be?

The above three open-ended questions directly and explicitly target the nation’s past, future, and major character, respectively, and thus tap by proxy respondents’ national stories as defined here. Due to many cases in which respondents referred to the same events and characters in the same way, or very similarly, we labeled these references using a single description. We determined the categories inductively based on respondents’ answers – for both voters and nonvoters – by unifying references to the same, or very similar, events and characters. For example, respondents referred to the same past event, ‘the establishment of Israel’, in multiple ways (‘the establishment of the state’, ‘the country’s independence’, ‘the 1948 declaration of Israel’s independence’); similarly, World War II was mentioned using a variety of designations (WW2, Second World War, etc.). Two independent coders assigned categories (past, future, and character) to 300 answers, based on a list of all coding categories. Intercoder reliability was no lower than alpha

⁴As opposed to our open-ended approach, these studies identified a list of national events through a qualitative textual analysis of constitutive documents of the nation and used these events to construct closed-ended survey questions.

Krippendorff 0.83 for the past category, 0.7 for the future category, and 0.87 for the character category. The coding protocol and the most central stories in each country are presented in Online Appendix B.

Construction of the independent variables

Our main independent variable, Completeness of National Story, is measured on a four-level scale: (0) no story: a respondent does not hold any component of a national story (i.e., did not mention any story components in the open-ended questions); (1) an incomplete story with two missing components (e.g., the respondent mentioned only a past event, but no future prospect or a central national character); (2) an incomplete story with one missing component (e.g., no future prospect was mentioned, but both past event and a character were); (3) a complete national story, which incorporates all three essential components stipulated above (i.e., the respondent mentioned past event, future prospect, and a national character). For example, if a Danish respondent mentioned that the most important past event for the Danish people was the introduction of the Basic Law but did not mention a future prospect and an actor, she scored 1 in this measure as her story incorporates only one component. If she mentioned three story components (e.g., the introduction of Basic Law as the past event, a better welfare system as the future prospect, and Thorvald Stauning as the important character), she scored 3 in this measure. Online Appendix A presents descriptive statistics for the completeness variable (ranging from 0 to 3) and for the other independent variables for all five countries in our sample.

To measure the *Proximity to the Central Stories* variable, namely the proximity of a respondent's personal national story to the nation's central stories, we first identified the latter for each country. To the best of our knowledge, research to-date has not developed concrete empirical tools to recognize society's central stories. We define central stories as ones consisting of the most popular components of past, future, and character components in each society targeted.

To assess the distance between a respondent's personal national story and the central stories in each country sampled, we created a seven-point scale, ranging from 0 to 6. The scale reflects the extent to which respondents' answers regarding the three story components (past, future, and character) were consistent with those of the respective countries' central stories, defined as the five most popular answers for each component of national stories. To each of the three story components mentioned by a respondent, we assigned a score based on the following criteria: not providing a component (e.g., no past component) did not add any points to the scale; a story component that deviated from the nation's central components (e.g., a past event that is not one of the five most central past events) added one point; and a story component that aligned with the nation's central components added two points to a respondent's overall score (i.e., a past event that is one of the five most central such events).

To create the final scale, we summed the scores for each of the three components. Accordingly, 0 represents the maximum distance from the nation's central stories, while 6 represents a full overlap (i.e., no distance). For example, suppose a British respondent mentioned Winston Churchill as the most significant character in British history, World War 2, as the significant past event, but also mentioned 'fairer welfare system' as the nation's desired future prospect. Since Churchill and World War 2 are among the five most central characters and past events, respectively, but the future prospect designated is not, the respondent scored 5 on the proximity scale, as she is close to the central national story in two components.

Control variables

Based on previous models of voter turnout, we divided the possible predictors into two groups. The first, sometimes called 'the personal resources model', includes sociological-demographic variables. As part of this group, we controlled for variables that were previously found as relevant,

namely, age and education – individual-level factors that have been shown to increase turnout (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Blais, 2000; Dalton, 2013; Smets, 2016). We also controlled for gender (Carreras, 2018), as well as religiosity and income (Blais et al., 2004).

The second group of covariates focuses on political attitudes and involvement – factors that are known to explain various types of political behavior, including turnout (Miller et al., 1996). This group is usually referred to as ‘the psychological model’ or ‘the political-attitude model’ (e.g., Verba, et al., 1995; Dalton, 2013). Of this group of variables, we controlled for political trust (Bélanger & Nadeau, 2005), political discussion (Hopmann, 2012), and news consumption (Schuck et al., 2016). The operationalization of each control variable is elaborated in Online Appendix C. We also controlled for country-specific dummies in order to account for country-level differences (e.g., Blais & Rubenson, 2013).

Results

According to the concept of story incentive, adherence to a national story is expected to increase the likelihood of voting. Moreover, we assumed the centrality of a person’s national story to be important as well, further enhancing such probability.

Completeness of national story

According to our main hypothesis (H1), the more complete a person’s national story, the higher the likelihood that she will vote. Figure 1 is based on a logistic regression estimating turnout (binary variable) in all five countries as a function of national story completeness while controlling for relevant alternative explanations (full results are in Table D1 in Online Appendix D). It presents the relationship between completeness of the national story and voting turnout. The results show that the more complete a national story in the respondents’ minds, the greater the probability that they will vote. For example, if a respondent mentioned only a character, but no past or future event, she scored 1 on the *completeness* variable, and her probability of voting was estimated as 84%. The probability of voting for respondents who mentioned all three components (character as well as past and future events) was 90%.

Thus, in line with the first hypothesis, completeness of the respondents’ national stories was found to have a positive and significant impact on their likelihood of voting. As in previously reported studies (see above), the psychological and personal resource variables emerged as strong predictors of voting intentions.⁵

Although the effect size of the story completeness variable is relatively small, we believe that it should not be taken lightly for two reasons. First, in close races, even small changes in turnout rate can have a large effect on the final election results – both in first-past-the-post systems and in proportional systems, where parties must win a minimum vote share to get seats in parliament⁶. Second, the effect size of the story variable is quite similar to other important covariates. For example, the difference between the minimum level of education (no education or only elementary school) and the maximum level (MA degree and above) is associated with a 10% increase in the likelihood of voting. Age, another well-known covariate, increases turnout probability all in all by 8%, and the effect of political trust is even smaller (a 6% increase). In comparison, for the *completeness* variable, the difference between the minimum (no story) and the maximum value (complete story) is associated with an 11% increase in turnout. It should be noted that, on the whole, effects on turnout found in the existing literature are modest (e.g., Dalton, 2013), possibly because

⁵We present the results of a series of robustness tests in Online Appendix F.

⁶For example, in the 2016 US presidential elections, Democratic strongholds such as Wisconsin and Pennsylvania eventually supported the Republican Party by only a razor-thin margin (less than 1%).

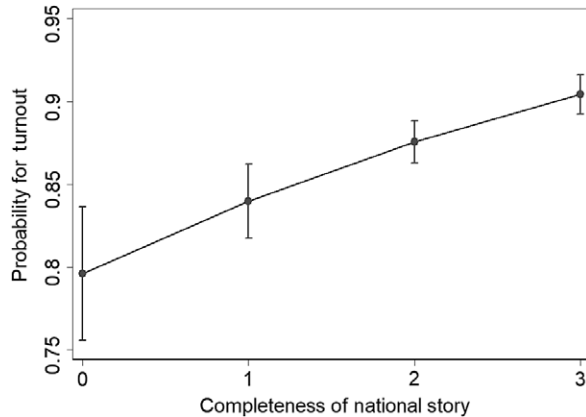


Figure 1. The relationship between the Completeness of National Story and Turnout Probability (with 95% confidence intervals). (1) Y axis presents the predicted probabilities for voting within different values of the national story variable (X axis). (2) Results are derived from Table D1 (Model 1) in Online Appendix D.

political participation is shaped by many factors, such as personal resources, political attitudes, interpersonal networks, and others (Verba *et al.*, 1995; Dalton, 2013).

Proximity to the central stories

According to the second hypothesis, the greater the proximity between an individual's national story to his or her country's central stories, the greater the likelihood of voting. Table 1 presents the results of a logistic regression estimating turnout as a function of the proximity to the common stories variable while controlling for relevant alternative explanations. The analysis presented in Model 1 contains all of the respondents, including those who lack several components of national stories. As expected, proximity to common stories has a significant and positive impact on voting intentions.

Models 2–4 present the same analyses but when gradually excluding respondents with incomplete stories (e.g., Model 2 includes respondents who mentioned at least one story component). Results show that, while the original associations remain stable among those with at least one or two story components (Models 2 and 3, respectively), the impact of proximity to the central stories on turnout becomes statistically insignificant among those embracing a complete national story (i.e., respondents with all three components; Model 4). These results provide an initial indication that the impact of story proximity is contingent on respondents' story completeness.

We therefore further examined the unique impact of embracing common versus uncommon stories among respondents with a complete national story. Table 2 presents the results of a logistic regression estimating the differences in voting between individuals whose story components belong to the common national story compared to those with uncommon story components. The results show a positive coefficient, meaning that embracing common stories is associated with a higher likelihood to vote compared to uncommon stories, but this relationship is statistically insignificant.

Taken together, we cannot confirm the proximity hypothesis (H2) as it is mostly supported when taking into account all respondents, including those with incomplete national stories. We also did not find support for what we termed as 'the counter-narrative effect' of uncommon stories, which may result in higher turnout rates for those embracing uncommon stories. We believe that these inconclusive findings can provide helpful guidelines for further research that will use content-sensitive analyses, thus allowing a cross-country narrative analysis (we elaborate more on this in the Conclusion section).

Table 1. Story incentive: the relationship between proximity to central stories and voter turnout

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All sample	At least 1 component	At least 2 components	All 3 components
Proximity to central stories	0.179*** (0.030)	0.185*** (0.038)	0.175*** (0.052)	0.109 (0.075)
Female	0.037 (0.096)	0.091 (0.101)	0.133 (0.110)	0.226 [†] (0.132)
Age	0.150*** (0.031)	0.158*** (0.032)	0.144*** (0.035)	0.140*** (0.041)
Education	0.314*** (0.072)	0.357*** (0.077)	0.334*** (0.084)	0.371*** (0.100)
Religiosity	0.427*** (0.116)	0.367** (0.124)	0.432** (0.136)	0.473** (0.166)
Income	0.174** (0.057)	0.236*** (0.060)	0.233*** (0.065)	0.209** (0.076)
Political discussion	1.495*** (0.164)	1.568*** (0.173)	1.638*** (0.188)	1.600*** (0.220)
Political trust	0.652** (0.219)	0.625** (0.234)	0.702** (0.252)	0.659* (0.293)
News consumption	1.595*** (0.195)	1.535*** (0.208)	1.497*** (0.230)	1.457*** (0.283)
Israel	-1.498*** (0.195)	-1.660*** (0.209)	-1.655*** (0.234)	-1.520*** (0.288)
Netherlands	-0.306 [†] (0.178)	-0.493* (0.195)	-0.506* (0.227)	-0.447 (0.295)
UK	-0.610*** (0.173)	-0.767*** (0.192)	-0.768*** (0.220)	-0.728** (0.281)
US	-1.217*** (0.173)	-1.405*** (0.191)	-1.422*** (0.218)	-1.379*** (0.274)
Constant	-1.930*** (0.290)	-1.999*** (0.324)	-1.902*** (0.389)	-1.709** (0.536)
Observations	3977	3721	3323	2502
Pseudo R2	0.171	0.174	0.170	0.156

[†] $P < 0.1$, * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$.

(1) The statistical analysis is a binary logistic regression, with the dependent variable being an intention to vote. Standard errors are indicated in parentheses. (2) The reference category for the country-specific dummies is Denmark. (3) Model 1 includes the full sample; Model 2 includes respondents who had at least one story component (out of three); Model 3 includes respondents who had at least two components (out of three); and Model 4 includes respondents with all three story components.

Robustness tests

We empirically tested the relationship between the strength of a person’s national attachment and our main story variables. We used Huddy and Khatib’s (2007) questions, designed to capture ‘national identity’ in the US. In line with previous studies demonstrating that citizens’ ties with national symbols increase the strength of their national attachment (Schatz & Lavine, 2007), we found positive but weak correlations between attachment to the nation and (1) completeness of a national story ($r = 0.187$) and (2) proximity to the most popular national stories ($r = 0.194$).⁷ Moreover, we added to the regression analysis a covariate tapping the strength of a person’s attachment to her nation. Results, presented in Online Appendix E, remain stable, that is, the impact of story completeness on turnout is above and beyond the strength of national attachment (no collinearity was observed). Taken together, this robustness test suggests that our story variables tap a different facet of national identity than previous measures that capture the strength of a person’s national belonging. Our story variables tap the story people conceive of when they think about their nation and the extent to which this story is shared by their compatriots.

⁷Since we had a direct measure of the strength of national attachment only for the US, all of the robustness tests for this variable are based on the US sample.

Table 2. The relationship between embracing common versus uncommon stories and voter turnout

	Model 1
Common stories (ref. = uncommon stories)	0.407 (0.275)
Female	-0.005 (0.237)
Age	0.250** (0.077)
Education	0.376* (0.175)
Religiosity	0.615 [†] (0.0315)
Income	0.253 [†] (0.134)
Political discussion	1.783*** (0.402)
Political trust	0.068 (0.513)
News consumption	1.510** (0.532)
Israel	-1.526** (0.564)
Netherlands	-0.220 (0.612)
UK	-1.083* (0.550)
US	-1.466** (0.554)
Constant	-1.774* (0.791)
Observations	751
Pseudo R2	0.185

[†] $P < 0.1$, * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$.

(1) The statistical analysis is a binary logistic regression, with the dependent variable being an intention to vote. Standard errors are indicated in parentheses. (2) The reference category for the country-specific dummies is Denmark. (3) The analysis was conducted among individuals who embraced a complete national story (all three components). (4) The story dummy variable compared between individuals whose story components all belong to the nation's central stories and individuals whose components are uncommon stories.

We also tested our models in each country separately. Despite differences in regime type and electoral systems, the results, presented in Online Appendix F, support our original conclusions and generally hold across countries.

Conclusion

The importance of voter turnout for the legitimacy and the outcomes of elections is well established in scholarship. Nonetheless, our understanding of what drives turnout remains far from comprehensive. This paper suggests a new explanation for voter turnout – one grounded in the role that social and political narratives occupy in people's identity. It introduces the idea of 'story incentive', an assumption that embracing a group's social story will incentivize individuals to take part in that group's political activities.

Our main hypothesis (H1) was that the likelihood of voting would be higher among people who have a stronger connection with any kind of national stories, and the more so for those who espouse any complete version of a national story. Our additional hypothesis (H2) was that the greater the proximity between an individual's national story and the central stories in the

respective country, the greater the likelihood that she will vote on Election Day. Our analyses provided an initial indication that the impact of story proximity is contingent on respondents' story completeness, and therefore this hypothesis was not confirmed.

Overall, the empirical evidence obtained supports our theorizing that voting is incentivized when a national story is part of a citizen's consciousness, as indicated in our main hypothesis. Such an association between the sense of belonging to a national community and the extent to which one's narrative identity is shared by one's compatriots resonates with the vast body of literature on the social and political role of sharing narratives. Moreover, our results contribute to the literature concerned with the political consequences of different dimensions of national identity (e.g., Huddy & del Ponte, 2019; Gustavsson & Stendahl, 2020). We have shown that national stories can be considered as a unique facet of this multidimensional construct that is beneficial to the nation as a whole, due to an association observed across countries between embracing national stories and greater responsibility to the national community manifested in the act of voting.

From a comparative perspective, previous studies found that different institution-level factors – such as power concentration and proportional electoral systems – yield different incentives for citizens to vote (Jackman, 1987; Blais, 2006). While the nuances in the relation between story incentive and different electoral systems undoubtedly warrant further research, the conclusions of the study presented here generally hold across five countries which differ in their institutional settings. This, in itself, underscores the importance of national stories embraced by citizens for their decision to vote, above and beyond system-level characteristics.

Our findings also shed light on what we term a *narrative meaning of voting*. Voting can be perceived as a symbolic act that helps citizens feel they are taking part in establishing a link between their nation's past and its future. Accordingly, if a person does not assign importance to her country's past or future, the act of voting seems to lose some of its meaning. This rationale constitutes our theoretical contribution to the understanding of voter turnout.

By suggesting and validating identity-driven explanations for individuals' likelihood to vote, our findings empirically account for voter turnout from a fresh perspective. Addressing this issue from the new angle presented here may help overcome the challenges encountered by a long line of scholarship on the voting paradox and contribute to the normatively oriented discussion on democracy and political participation. Thus, for example, our findings validate Sandel's (1996) concern over the implications of the 'fragmented storyless condition' into which, as he cautions, we are in danger of slipping 'individually and collectively' (p. 351). It appears, therefore, that studying the effects of story incentive should not be dissociated from this normative debate – especially since Sandel's misgivings resonate with the communal function of narratives discussed above. Sandel elaborates this notion in a Webchat hosted by *The Guardian*:

Shared narratives are what hold communities together. The ability to tell stories is to see one's life as part of a larger story. And so the capacity for narrative is what situates us in the world. By the drift to storylessness, I mean the tendency in modern life to think of ourselves without reference to larger frameworks of meaning and belonging. One of the great moral and civic challenges of our time is to recover our capacity to tell compelling stories that relate our identities to shared communities of value and meaning (Sandel, 2014).

Sandel's words hark back to a widely known array of scholarly assumptions about the role of narratives in human society. In our view, and judging by the growing interest in empirical narrative research (e.g., Shanahan, Jones & McBeth, 2011; Jones & McBeth 2010; Jones & Radaelli, 2015), the time has come to test these theories empirically – albeit with several important caveats, which apply to the study presented here as well.

Needless to say, it would be quite impossible for any research that undertakes this challenge to give justice to the full richness of narratives in the societal and political domains. For our part, to capitalize

on the advantages afforded by a large-N cross-national research, we utilized a thin-level narrative analysis (Shenhav, 2015) that rests upon proxies of stories rather than analyze stories in-depth.

As an alternative compromise, one might elect to dispense with the comparative aspect of empirical narrative research and study voters' perceptions based on a nuanced interpretive analysis of a single case (e.g., Marin & Leo, 2019). Another remedy, more promising particularly for cross-country analysis, is to apply the theoretical framework that hinges on the concepts of master- or meta-narrative (e.g., Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Hammack, 2008, McLean & Syed, 2015) and zooms in on the main attributes and principles that characterize a set of stories rather than on the specific contents and distinctive features of a single story. Thus, theoretically, these concepts can furnish observations that are comparable across multiple case studies. Recently, master narratives have been defined and analyzed in a number of psychology investigations (e.g., McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed & McLean, 2020), which can offer a conceptual path for political scientists who wish to adopt this framework to explore such key political questions as 'the dynamic relation between the self and competing narratives' (Syed & McLean, 2020).

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773920000399>.

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