The Social Costs of Public Political Participation: Evidence from a Petition Experiment in Lebanon

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Abstract

While it is widely appreciated that public political action can be socially costly, there is little causal evidence of the effects of social pressure in general or on petition signing in particular. We examine the social costs of petition signing in the context of mass mobilization to reform the sectarian political system in Lebanon. We invited a nationally representative sample of 2,496 adults to sign a petition calling for an end to sectarian politics, randomly assigning respondents to a public condition where they had to provide their names or a private condition where they did not. Our results show that public signing significantly reduced willingness to participate despite private support for reform. The findings contribute to research on political behavior, preference falsification, and ethnic politics. They also should be of interest to scholars who use petition signing as a measure of costly political behavior.

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Engaging in public forms of political participation can be socially costly. While all political participation entails some time or effort costs, public modes of political participation differ from private ones—like voting by secret ballot—in that they can invoke criticism or social sanctioning from those who disagree (Hayes, Scheufele and Huge, 2006). Such social costs can induce individuals to dissimulate on public opinion surveys or in political discussion, or to opt out of other forms of public political engagement, like protest, signing a petition, or donating to campaigns (Berinksy 1999, Kuran 1995, La Raja 2014). This in turn has important consequences, including preference falsification, or the “selection of a public preference that differs from one’s private preference” (Kuran 1995, 17). Such a gap between public behavior and private preferences skews public discourse, creates obstacles to collective action, and leads to the persistence of unwanted social outcomes (Kuran 1995).

Importantly, few studies to date have provided causal evidence of the effects of social pressure on public political behavior in general and on petition signing in particular (Berinksy 1999, Kuran 1995, La Raja 2014). The lack of evidence for the social costs of petition signing is surprising given that it is a common and important form of public political participation (Margetts et al. 2011). In some contexts, signing a petition could be practically costless, both in terms of effort (consider the rise of online petitioning) and associated risk (Caren, Choshal and Ribas 2011). In other situations, however, petition signing could be socially costly if the supported action is controversial and made visible to those who disagree (La Raja 2014). In this paper we investigate the social costs of petition signing to understand their effect on willingness to engage in a public form of political action. Our inquiry should also interest researchers using petition signing as a measure of political behavior precisely because it is thought to be socially costly.

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1 There is even doubt about whether voters view their ballots as secret (Gerber et al., 2012).
2 Exceptions are Gerber, Green and Larimer (2008), La Raja (2014), and Margetts et al. (2011).
3 For examples, see Aaroe (2012), Milner, Nielson and Findley (2016), and Paluck (2011). For a review, see Lewandowski and Strohmetz (2009).
We examine the social costs of petition signing in the context of demands for political reform in Lebanon. In August 2015, mass protests erupted in Lebanon over the government’s failure to manage trash collection. The protests were in part a criticism of the paralysis caused by sectarianism, which is deeply embedded in Lebanese politics and society (Salloukh et al., 2015). As in the many countries where politics is defined by ethnic or sectarian cleavages (Chandra, 2007), Lebanon is dominated by sectarian political parties that use clientelism to maintain public support (Cammett, 2014). Consequently, while some Lebanese might privately dislike the sectarian status quo, they could be reluctant to admit so publicly for fear of being cut off from material benefits or socially sanctioned by their sectarian communities (Corstange, 2013). The political crisis in Lebanon thus presented an important opportunity to examine both the extent of private support for reform and the willingness of Lebanese citizens to make that position public.

We conducted a petition experiment in which respondents in a nationally representative survey were invited to sign a petition calling for an end to sectarian politics. Respondents were randomly assigned to a public condition where they had to provide their names and a private condition where they did not. We interpret the gap between signing in public and in private as evidence of the effects of fear of sanctioning on willingness to take a public political action. We find that making signing public caused a 15 percentage point decline in participation on average. It also had a significantly bigger effect on individuals and social groups facing higher social costs. These results provide some of the first evidence that petition signing can indeed be socially costly and that those costs can cause a significant reduction in willingness to take public political action despite private political support for an issue. We discuss the implications of these findings for research on political behavior and ethnic politics in the conclusion.

Research design

We used a petition experiment to examine the effects of public disclosure on willingness to take public political action. The petition content mirrored the issues raised in the mass protests underway in Lebanon: it condemned the role of sectarianism in politics, called for electoral reforms that would reduce the influence of sectarian parties, and demanded that policy-making reflect national development priorities rather than narrow sectarian interest. All participants were informed that the petitions would be shared with their party and sectarian leaders (see Appendix A for the full text and invitation to participate).

The opportunity to sign the petition was presented at the end of a face-to-face survey conducted with a nationally representative sample of 2,496 Lebanese adults selected through stratified random sampling. Respondents were randomly assigned to a public or private version of the petition. In the private condition, individuals who signed were required to provide only their age, confession, and electoral district. In the public condition, signatories also had to provide their name. All respondents made their decision in private and sealed the petition—whether completed or not—in an envelope before returning it to the enumerator.

The main outcome of interest is a binary indicator of whether a respondent signed the petition and completed all information appropriate to their treatment condition. We interpret lower levels of signing in public than in private as evidence that fear of social sanctioning reduced public political action. This interpretation is consistent with the definition of preference falsification as the “act of misrepresenting one’s genuine wants under perceived social pressures” (Kuran 1995:3).

We take two approaches to evaluating how the effects of public disclosure vary for those

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5 For details on the sampling and randomization procedure, see Appendix B. For evidence that randomization was successful, see the balance tests in Appendix D.
6 This effect could be reversed if social pressure induced people to sign. While we think this unlikely in our context, this underscores that social pressure can work in opposing directions.
with different social costs of signing. First, we investigate how social pressure from leaders, members of one’s immediate social network, and the broader sectarian community condition the effects of public disclosure on willingness to sign. Given the prominence of sectarian-based clientelism in Lebanon, it is unclear whether individuals are more likely to censor their behavior in response to pressure from elites or from their communities. To examine this, we use the following pre-treatment survey question(s): “How difficult would it be to do something that you wanted to do that did not align with the opinions of [your sectarian or political leader/your family, friends or neighbors/or your confessional community]?”

Second, it is likely that the costs of public disclosure vary for different social groups. We focus on how the effects of making signing public vary by economic status and sectarian group—which are particularly relevant given the nature of the petition—and by gender. While the results on treatment effect heterogeneity do not have a causal interpretation, we show in Appendix G.1 that they are robust to controlling for a large number of potential confounding variables.

We estimate treatment effects using a weighted least squares regression of petition signing on the treatment assignment indicator, controlling for sampling strata and clustering standard errors at the level of the primary sampling unit. We use sampling and balancing weights to make population-level inferences. Details on our weighting procedure, estimation strategy, and robustness checks are available in Appendices C, F, and G.

Results

Table 1 presents the main results, with Panel A showing the overall effect of public disclosure on willingness to sign the petition. About 71 percent of all adult citizens were willing to sign the petition in private. This is a remarkably high level of support for reforming the sectarian status quo. There is, however, clear evidence of a divergence between private preferences and

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7 Responses were recorded on a four-point Likert scale ranging from ‘very difficult’ to ‘not difficult at all’, which we recode into a binary indicator by cutting at the mid-point.

8 See Appendix E for details on all measures used in the heterogeneous effects analysis.
public political behavior—making petition signing public reduced willingness to participate by 15 percentage points. This result is both substantively and statistically significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel A: Main Results</th>
<th>private petition (control mean)</th>
<th>coeff</th>
<th>s.e.</th>
<th>pval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment (public disclosure)</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel B: Fear of sanctioning</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By sectarian leaders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diff</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>0.284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By family, friends, neighbors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diff</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>0.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By sectarian community</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diff</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>0.739</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel C: Social groups</th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diff</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic class (index)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper income</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower income</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diff</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>0.088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sectarian group</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Maronite Christian</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>0.266</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shia Muslim</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>0.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diff (Sunni*Treat)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>0.135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Reported p-values are from a two-tailed test.

Table 1: Effects of public disclosure on petition signing

Panel B shows how the effect of public disclosure varies for those with ‘low’ and ‘high’ costs of taking a controversial position vis-a-vis sectarian elites, family and friends, or the broader sectarian community. Public disclosure significantly reduced petition signing for everyone, including those with low social costs. Yet, public disclosure had the greatest effect on reducing participation for those afraid of disagreeing with their friends, family, and

9The strong support could be due to the fact that this was an unprecedented moment for mass mobilization in Lebanon. The fact that we still see negative effects of public disclosure at a time when public perceptions of protest were very positive (and social costs likely at their lowest) means we might be capturing a lower bound on the impact of social costs.
neighbors. Making petition signing public reduced participation by 9 percentage points for those who are less afraid of sanctioning and by 25 percentage points for those who are more afraid, a significant 16 percentage point difference. These findings are notable because they suggest that sectarian politics in Lebanon might be sustained primarily by pressure from one’s immediate social network rather than from sectarian elites or broader social norms.

Panel C demonstrates that public disclosure varied for social groups that likely face different social costs. First, we find that while public disclosure reduced participation for both men and women, the effects are similar across the two groups. This is notable because, while there is some evidence that women prefer public goods to clientelism (Wantchekon, 2003), both men and women in this context have similar private preferences and face similar social costs to expressing them. The evidence does, however, suggest that public disclosure caused a greater divergence between public and private behavior for the poor (24 percentage points) compared to those with higher incomes (11 percentage points). Importantly, these findings indicate that the effects of public disclosure are greatest for a group that could benefit the most from system reform but that is also the most vulnerable to getting cut off from sectarian benefits.

Finally, we look at the effects of public disclosure on members of Lebanon’s three main sectarian groups. The results suggest that public signing had no significant effect on Maronite Christians but reduced participation by 15 percentage points for Shia Muslims and 27 percentage points for Sunni Muslims. This pattern is consistent with the fact that Sunnis have arguably experienced the greatest threat to their sectarian status in recent years due to reduced international support from Saudi Arabia, a weakening party, and rising Shia strength (Salloukh et al., 2015). This evidence of variation in willingness to take public political action despite substantial private demand for reform across all sectarian groups highlights the challenges that social costs pose to collective action.

One concern might be that the gap between public and private behavior is not due to

10For a more detailed discussion of these results, see Appendix H.
social costs but rather to a general distaste for public petition signing. Indeed, this could be one reason why we observe negative treatment effects even for those in ‘low cost’ groups. Yet, the fact that public disclosure reduces participation more for those who are most susceptible to pressure supports the claim that fear of social sanctioning is an important factor in the decision to take public political action.

Discussion

This paper shows that making petition signing public caused a significant reduction in the willingness to participate despite substantial private support for reforming the sectarian political system in Lebanon. In doing so, it makes several broader contributions. First, this paper contributes to research on political behavior by providing some of the first evidence for how petition signing can be socially costly.\footnote{This paper is most closely related to Margetts et al. (2011), who examine how the number of signatories visible on a petition affects the decision to sign. de la Cuesta et al. (2015) give respondents the option to sign their name or not but in that paper the gap is partly determined by those who select into public signing because they get expressive benefits.} We are not arguing that our results suggest that petition signing should always be private—this is indeed unrealistic in contexts where signatures must be validated.\footnote{U.S. law, for instance, requires the public disclosure of signatures on ballot referenda.} Rather, we contend that the approach taken here is useful in that it reveals both private support for an issue and the social costs associated with making that support public.

Second, this paper demonstrates the consequences of these social costs by showing a significant gap between private preferences and public political behavior. It thus contributes to research on an aspect of preference falsification that is hard to study. While researchers are increasingly using list experiments and other indirect questioning techniques to understand the gap between public opinion (as reported on surveys) and private preferences (Rosenfeld, Imai and Shapiro, 2016), these approaches only capture one form of preference falsification:
that which arises from reluctance to admit a socially undesirable position to a stranger (an interviewer). This paper calls attention to the fact that the costs of violating norms are likely even greater when imposed by one’s own social network, and that it is these sources of pressure that plausibly matter most for understanding public political behavior.

The findings presented here are also relevant to research on ethnic politics. While numerous studies have documented high levels of support for co-ethnic parties and candidates, it is hard to know if voters support the ethnic status quo precisely because the issue is sensitive (Corstange, 2013; Carlson, 2016). Our results support the notion that in some contexts, individuals despise ethnic politics but worry about expressing that through public political action because they fear losing access to benefits or violating intra-group social norms (Miguel and Gugerty, 2005; Habyarimana et al., 2009). Moreover, in finding that the effect of public disclosure is greatest for those who fear sanctioning by family and friends (rather than by elites or the broader sectarian community) this paper is one of the first to shed light on which actors in an ethnic group are most responsible for imposing the costs that shape political behavior. Future research should aim to identify causally how pressure from each of these different sources affects political participation in ethnically divided societies.

Finally, this paper should be of broad interest to researchers from a measurement perspective. It is now widely appreciated that attitudinal measures on surveys do not necessarily reveal how individuals actually behave. Researchers are increasingly using petition signing as a behavioral outcome measure precisely because it entails a purposeful choice about real-world activism that is thought to be socially costly. While this paper finds evidence for the social costs of signing petitions, those costs likely vary substantially by context and individual. Ultimately, whether petition signing—or any public political participation for that matter—is costly depends on the extent to which taking that action is controversial (in one’s

\[13\] The findings are consistent with Corstange (2013), who shows that respondents in Lebanon are less influenced by sectarian concerns when asked indirectly (through a list experiment) about their support for a specific policy.
social setting) and is observable. We urge researchers to be explicit in taking these factors into consideration when using petition measures in order to deepen our understanding of the causes and consequences of the social costs of public political participation.

References


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