

# 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 evidence of the effects of social pressure on petition signing despite its importance as a mode of political participation. 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 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 reduced willingness to participate by 20 percentage points despite substantial private support for reform and that this reduction was significantly greater for those more afraid of social sanctioning. This is strong evidence that social pressure can deter individuals from publicly expressing their private political preferences.<sup>1</sup>

**Key words:** Political behavior; political participation; preference falsification; social pressure; petition signing; ethnic politics; Lebanon.

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<sup>1</sup>Supplementary material for this article is available in the online appendix. Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse. This study is covered under University of Pittsburgh IRB PRO15060167 and the analysis was pre-registered with Evidence in Governance and Politics ([egap.org/registration/1984](http://egap.org/registration/1984)). This project was made possible by a grant from the International Development Research Centre to the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.

It is widely believed that social pressure affects public political participation. While all political participation entails some time or effort costs, public modes of participation differ from private ones—like voting by secret ballot—in that they can invoke scrutiny. Such scrutiny can promote pro-social behavior and increase participation when taking action is socially desirable, as with turnout in elections (Gerber, Green and Larimer, 2008; Panagopoulos, 2010). Yet, when an issue is controversial, taking a public position can invoke criticism or sanctioning by those who disagree (Hayes, Scheufele and Huges, 2006; Klar and Krupnikov, 2016). These social costs can deter individuals from publicly expressing their private beliefs, inducing them to dissimulate on opinion surveys or in political discussion, or to opt out of other forms of public participation, like protest or donating to campaigns (Kuran, 1995; Mutz, 2002; La Raja, 2014; Rosenfeld, Imai and Shapiro, 2016). Such preference falsification—defined as the gap between public behavior and private preferences—is harmful in that it 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 examined the social costs of one common and important form of public political behavior: petition signing. Individuals might rationally choose to sign a petition when the benefits from participation exceed the social (and other) costs of doing so.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, the choice to sign a petition could be practically socially costless, for instance when an issue has widespread support in one’s social environment. When signaling support for an issue is unpopular within—and observable to—one’s social network, however, the potential social costs of signing could be consequential (La Raja, 2014).<sup>3</sup> Importantly,

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<sup>2</sup>For more on these other costs and how this study controls for them, see Appendix E.1. In this study the benefits of signing are primarily expressive but in theory they could also be strategic insofar as one person’s participation could be pivotal to inducing a collective action cascade (Kuran, 1995; Margetts et al., 2011).

<sup>3</sup>The reverse could also be true in some contexts: A person who does not support an issue might sign if there are social costs for *not* doing so, for instance if everyone in one’s network were

whether and how social costs affect petition signing will depend on the context and the person, especially the sensitivity of the issue within an individual’s social environment, their tolerance for social pressure, and the visibility of the action.

This paper investigates the social costs of petition signing in one context to assess their effect on willingness to engage in a public form of political action. We do so with respect to 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). Lebanon’s government is characterized by institutionalized sectarian power-sharing of the top executive and legislative offices as well as by quotas for seats in parliament and high-level civil service positions. Moreover, as in the many countries where ethnic cleavages define political competition, Lebanon is dominated by sectarian political parties that use clientelism to maintain public support (Cammett, 2014). While some Lebanese likely view sectarianism as important to ensuring social stability, others might privately dislike it but fear that saying so publicly would result in exclusion from material benefits or other social sanctioning (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 were required to provide their names and a private condition where they were not. We find that making signing public caused a 20 percentage point decline in participation on average in the sample and that the effect was significantly bigger for those more susceptible to social pressure. 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 public political action despite private political support

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participating and *inaction* was observable.

for an issue. These findings have important implications for research on political behavior and ethnic politics, discussed in the conclusion. The results should also be of interest from a measurement perspective as a growing number of researchers are using petition signing as a behavioral measure of willingness to take costly political action (for examples, see Paluck, 2011; Milner, Nielson and Findley, 2016; Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2017), although the nature and extent of these costs are rarely shown.

## Research design

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.<sup>4</sup>

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 multi-stage cluster random sampling. In implementing our randomization, primary sampling units in the survey (mainly villages in rural areas and cities or neighborhoods in urban areas) were first classified as ‘small’, ‘medium’, or ‘large’.<sup>5</sup> We block randomly assigned individuals within medium or large PSUs (the blocks) to public or private versions of the petition. Because we were concerned that individuals living in small PSUs would be more likely to share information on the different petition versions, we cluster randomly assigned small PSUs to the public or private petition conditions, this time blocking within strata formed at a more aggre-

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<sup>4</sup>See Appendix A for the full text, invitation to participate, and discussion of the ethical considerations surrounding the public release of the petitions.

<sup>5</sup>PSUs with 2000 or fewer people were classified as ‘small’; those with 2,001-35,000 people were classified as ‘medium’, and those with more than 35,000 people were classified as ‘large’.

gate level.<sup>6</sup> 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 submitting 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 hypothesize that private and public preferences will diverge when those preferences will be made known to political elites.<sup>7</sup> We interpret lower levels of signing in public than in private as evidence that fear of social sanctioning reduced the willingness to take public political action. Conversely, we regard higher levels of signing in public as an indication that it is more socially costly *not* to criticize sectarianism publicly. Either result would be consistent with the definition of preference falsification as the “act of misrepresenting one’s genuine wants under perceived social pressures” (Kuran, 1995, 3).

To confirm the role of social pressure, we test the hypothesis that the effect of public disclosure is greater for those who are more afraid of social sanctioning. To do this we create a ‘fear of social sanctioning’ index using three pre-treatment survey questions: “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]?”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the three component measures enable us to explore how different sources of sectarian social pressure condition the effect of public disclosure. This is important because, while research on ethnic politics has documented the role of social sanctioning in maintaining ethnic group cohesion (Miguel and Gugerty, 2005; Habyarimana et al., 2009), less

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<sup>6</sup>For details on sampling, randomization, and balance checks, see Appendices B and C.

<sup>7</sup>The hypotheses tested in this paper were pre-registered (see Appendix J).

<sup>8</sup>Responses are recorded on a four-point Likert scale ranging from ‘not difficult at all’ to ‘very difficult’. See Appendix G.1 for more detail on our (pre-registered) approach to creating the index and implementing this analysis.

is known about whether individuals censor their behavior in response to fear of sanctioning by elites, members of their immediate social network, or their broader sectarian communities. While the results on treatment effect heterogeneity do not have a causal interpretation, we show in Appendix F that they are robust to controlling for a large number of potential confounders.<sup>9</sup>

We present results for the sample using an ordinary 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.<sup>10</sup> While this provides an unbiased estimate of treatment effects, one concern is that results might not generalize to the population due to survey non-response. Appendix H describes how we weight the sample to draw population inferences and shows that our results hold in the population.

## Results

Table 1 presents the main results, with the first column showing the overall effect of public disclosure on willingness to sign the petition. About 70 percent of all respondents in the sample were willing to sign the petition in private. This is a remarkably high level of support for reforming the sectarian status quo.<sup>11</sup> There is, however, clear evidence of a divergence between private preferences and public political behavior—making petition signing public reduced participation by 20 percentage points. This result is both substantively and statistically significant.

The remaining columns show how the effect of public disclosure varies for those with ‘low’

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<sup>9</sup>Appendix G.2 provides analysis of how the effect of public disclosure varies for social groups defined by sex, income, and sect.

<sup>10</sup>We cluster standard errors because of cluster random assignment in ‘small’ PSUs (see Appendix B); clustering within all PSUs is a conservative approach. Appendix D has details on our estimation strategy.

<sup>11</sup>The high level of petition signing could be explained by the salience of the issue, the one-on-one nature of the invitation, or selection into the sample. For a discussion of these explanations and their implications for the results, see Appendix E.2.

	Main	Conditional effects: Fear of Sanctioning			
	treatment effect	Index	By elites	By fam	By commun.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Public petition (versus private)	-0.20*** (0.02)	-0.16*** (0.03)	-0.17*** (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.03)	-0.16*** (0.03)
Public × Fear sanctioning (index)		-0.08* (0.04)			
Public × Fear elite sanctioning			-0.10* (0.04)		
Public × Fear fam sanctioning				-0.14*** (0.04)	
Public × Fear commun. sanctioning					-0.09* (0.04)
Fear sanctioning (index)		0.01 (0.03)			
Fear elite sanctioning			0.05 (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
Fear fam. sanctioning			-0.03 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.02)
Fear commun. sanctioning			-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Constant (signed in private)	0.70 (0.01)	0.70 (0.02)	0.70 (0.02)	0.69 (0.02)	0.70 (0.02)
N	2496	2496	2496	2496	2496

**Notes:** \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .  $P$ -values are based on a two-tailed test. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses; all results control for block fixed effects.

Table 1: Effects of public disclosure on petition signing

and ‘high’ fears of social sanctioning.<sup>12</sup> In this conditional effects analysis, the coefficients on the treatment indicator capture the effect of public disclosure for those with low social costs. The coefficients on the interaction terms—our main interest—show whether public disclosure has a bigger impact on those with high (versus low) fears of social sanctioning. Overall, the results in columns 2-5 indicate that public disclosure reduced petition signing for everyone, including those less susceptible to social pressure. We find, however, clear evidence that public disclosure caused a bigger reduction in participation for those with higher social costs. Looking at results for the index, we see that public disclosure reduced petition signing by 16 percentage points for those less afraid of social sanctioning. Yet, making petition signing public caused an additional (statistically significant) eight percentage point reduction in willingness to participate for those more susceptible to social pressure.

<sup>12</sup>For ease of interpretation in the analysis, we dichotomize the ‘fear of sanctioning’ index at the median and the component variables at the midpoint of the 1-4 scale.



The results also show that all three sources of social pressure—elites, immediate social network, and broader sectarian community—condition the effects of public disclosure. While this provides strong support for the hypotheses, the findings also reveal possible variation in how fears of social sanctioning by different actors within a sectarian community affect willingness to take public action. Specifically, the evidence suggests that public disclosure had the biggest effect on those afraid of disagreeing with their friends, family, and neighbors. These results, consistent with recent findings in Corstange (2016), indicate that sectarian politics in Lebanon might be sustained primarily by pressure from one’s immediate social network. While not statistically significant (see Appendix G.1), the differences in coefficient magnitudes are nonetheless notable insofar as they highlight the need for more research on how different sources of social pressure within ethnic communities affect public political engagement.

One concern with the results might be that the effects of public disclosure are due to higher *effort* costs—since respondents in the public condition had an additional line to complete—rather than social costs.<sup>13</sup> While this additional cost is likely minimal, it could help to explain why the public petition treatment reduced participation among even those with low social costs. Alternatively, the gap between public and private behavior could be attributable to a general distaste for public petition signing. Future research could investigate this using a placebo petition to test whether making petition signing public discourages participation even on a non-sensitive issue. Overall, however, the fact that public disclosure has a bigger effect on those more susceptible to pressure supports the claim that social costs are important to the decision to take public political action.

## Discussion

This paper shows that fear of social sanctioning can deter individuals from publicly expressing their private political preferences. Making petition signing public caused a significant reduction

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<sup>13</sup>For an extended discussion of the possible inferential risks associated with the experimental design—and why we believe these to be minimal—see Appendix E.1.

in the willingness to participate despite substantial private support for sectarian system reform and this reduction was significantly bigger for those more afraid of social sanctioning. In showing this, the paper makes several broader contributions. First, it contributes to research on political behavior by providing some of the first evidence for how petition signing can be socially costly. We are not arguing that petition signing should always be private—this is indeed unrealistic in contexts where signatures must be validated.<sup>14</sup> 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 could be 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 dislike ethnic politics but worry about expressing that through public political action because they fear losing access to benefits or violating intra-group social norms.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in finding suggestive

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<sup>14</sup>U.S. law, for instance, requires the public disclosure of signatures on ballot referenda.

<sup>15</sup>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

evidence that the effect of public disclosure is greatest for those afraid of sanctioning by family and friends, this paper underscores the need for more research on which actors within an ethnic community are most responsible for the social pressure that shapes public political behavior in ethnically divided societies.

Finally, this paper should be of general 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.<sup>16</sup> 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 costly. While this paper presents evidence that petitions can be socially costly and that those costs can dampen public political participation, the effects of public petition signing likely vary substantially by context, issue, and individual. We urge researchers seeking to use petitions as outcome measures to be explicit about the social (or other) costs of signing in their respective study contexts in order to deepen understanding of when and why individuals decide to take public political action.

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support for a specific policy.

<sup>16</sup>For evidence of this in the Lebanese context, see Corstange (2015).

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