

Institutions, expectations, and choices: Seven studies on strategic voting

Habilitation à diriger des recherches

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Résumé

Elections are the key instrument through which citizens can control or exert influence on policymakers. They are central in establishing a link between citizens and their representatives in parliament and government. The choice of representatives based on citizens' sincere preferences is thus a central component of the process of political representation. However, electoral rules and electoral systems are not a neutral mechanism that would simply and directly translate the expressed preferences of citizens in the choice of their representatives. As the number of MPs to be elected is limited, all electoral systems necessarily involve some distortions, with smaller parties being underrepresented, that is, receiving a share of seats smaller than their share of votes, and larger parties typically being overrepresented. This disproportionality of electoral results creates incentives for voters and parties to behave in a strategic way. In a variety of electoral systems, some voters may face incentives to support a party or candidate that differs from their sincere preferences. Furthermore, the presence of such incentives does not only result from the expected distortions in the translation of votes into seats. They may also be linked with later stages of the chain of political representation, such as the consequences of electoral results for the government formation and policy-making processes.

The nature of these incentives, the way in which they are perceived by citizens, and their influence on the behaviour of citizens and parties, are the elements at the centre of this habilitation thesis. It consists of a series of seven studies, divided into three parts, which deal with three main aspects of the interplay between electoral institutions, citizens' expectations, and voting choices: the effect of electoral rules on the structure of party systems, mainly in terms of the (effective) number of parties in competition; citizens' perceptions of parties' and candidates' electoral chances; and how individual and contextual level characteristics influence the likelihood that citizens defect from their sincere party preference.

The first part deals with the measurement and analysis of the psychological and mechanical effects of electoral systems. These effects were identified in a seminal study of Duverger and they refer to the expected reductive impact of majoritarian rules on the effective number of parties or candidates: The mechanical effect and its anticipation by voters and parties should reduce the number of parties in competition and lead to a concentration of votes and seats among the frontrunners. The central study in that part of the thesis is an article written jointly with André Blais, Airo Hino, and Pascal Doray-Demers, in which we develop a new approach for quantifying the mechanical and psychological effects. This involves comparisons of electoral outcomes in parallel elections based on different electoral rules. This approach is used to estimate electoral system effects in Switzerland and Japan.

The next two chapters build on that approach, in order to analyse how the relative importance of mechanical and psychological effects is influenced by institutional factors. One of these studies considers again the Swiss case, contrasting the results of the upper and lower houses from 1971 to 2003. It takes advantage of the variation in district magnitude and in the partisan

configuration of candidates between electoral districts. This study highlights the crucial role of party coordination. This is linked, among others, to district magnitude: parties are less able to coordinate in large PR districts, resulting in a larger number of party lists. This means that while the total electoral system effect is larger, the proportion of this effect due to the successful anticipation by parties becomes smaller. Although this opens more room for a psychological effect on voters, the analysis of Swiss voters' behaviour shows, surprisingly maybe, no relation between district magnitude and the relative importance of the effect on voters. The last study in the first part of this thesis (with André Blais and Ignacio Lago) also applies the approach of Blais et al. to quantify electoral system effects, in the case of the 2005 and 2009 parliamentary elections in Portugal. Rather than comparing a PR and a non-PR election, this article focuses on the variation in district magnitude among PR districts. We investigate the effect of having districts of varying magnitude, some of them very small, rather than a system that would be, in all districts, as proportional as in the largest Portuguese district, in Lisbon. The key variable relating district magnitude to electoral system effects is party viability. If all districts were large (i.e., more proportional), more parties would be viable, leading citizens to eventually cast a different vote. This study shows that the proportion of such strategic voters is relatively small in Portugal. But the way in which district magnitude affects the distribution of votes (and seats) follows an expected pattern: if districts were larger, both the effective number of parliamentary parties and the share of votes received by small parties would be larger, reducing the concentration of votes and seats among the larger competitors.

The second part of this thesis deals with citizens' expectations about electoral outcomes, looking thus as one of the preconditions for strategic voting. It is made up of two articles: one focusing on the phenomenon of wishful thinking, and the other on the frequent assumption that voters in larger districts are less able to estimate parties' chances of success. Regarding the former, several studies have previously demonstrated that citizens tend to overestimate the chances of success of their preferred party or candidate. Building on these findings, I focus on voters' perceptions in a proportional electoral system, whereas most of the existing literature has dealt with majoritarian systems. More precisely, this study considers the 2011 regional parliamentary elections in the canton of Zurich, Switzerland. This article seeks to explain citizens' perceptions about party viability in their electoral district, that is, the perceived chances that a party wins at least one seat. In addition to party identification, which is generally included in studies of wishful thinking, I test for the effect of ideological preferences, which might constitute an additional source of bias in the evaluation of parties' electoral chances. The results show a strong partisan bias in citizens' expectations and a significant but smaller ideological bias. They further show that while citizens with a higher degree of political sophistication are less subject to these wishful thinking effects, the biases do not disappear entirely, even at high levels of political expertise.

The next study (with Ignacio Lago and André Blais) approaches the topic of voters' expectations from a different angle. It considers whether the accuracy of citizens' expectations about party chances is significantly reduced in larger electoral districts. This study reassesses the role of district magnitude in explaining the lesser frequency of strategic voting in large PR districts. To that end, it focuses on citizens' expectations for the 2011 Spanish general elections, in the region of Catalonia. This study considers how the accuracy of citizens' expectations relates to the margin of votes that a party would have needed to win a seat (in case it did not win any) respectively the margin of votes it should have lost in order not win any seat (in the case of parties which won seats). These margins of votes are inversely related to the difficulty of making an accurate prediction about the fate of a party in a given

district. However, our study shows that these margins do not have any systematic effect of expectations accuracy. Rather, we find that citizens' expectations are influenced by parties' results in the previous election: those who won one or more seats in the last election in a voter's district are credited with higher chances – information which is presumably equally available in large and small districts.

The final part of the thesis, made up again of two articles, focuses on citizens' strategic voting behaviour. The first one represents an attempt to bridge two streams of literature on strategic voting: the avoidance of wasted votes and policy-driven strategic voting, that is, seats-maximizing and portfolio-maximizing strategies. While both have received much attention in the literature, they usually have been studied separately. An important reason is likely to be that the avoidance of wasted votes is more commonly associated with majoritarian electoral systems, while the expected policy position of the government is a more relevant consideration under proportional electoral rules. However, given the large variation in district magnitude in many PR systems, citizens in small or medium-sized districts may well be confronted with both types of incentives. In such cases, a model that includes both types of strategic incentives should lead to a better explanation of citizens' behaviour. This is all the more important as the effects of coalition-related considerations should be conditional on district-related incentives. While policy-driven factors might incite citizens to support a party more extreme than their sincere preference, in order to move the expected government coalition as close as possible to their ideal point, this should only influence their voting behaviour if the corresponding more extreme party is also viable in their district. Following this line of reasoning, I develop a model that incorporates both sources of strategic behaviour, and test it with data from the 2011 Swiss election study. The results show that strategic voting is relatively frequent, and that defections from citizens' preferred party are due to both district-level and coalition-related incentives. They also confirm that the effects of both sources of incentives are conditional on one another.

Finally, the last study (with Hanspeter Kriesi) deals with voters' behaviour in regional governmental elections held in April 2011 in two Swiss cantons, Zurich and Lucerne. These elections take place in a single, multi-member electoral district with a two-round majority-plurality rule. Citizens have as many votes as there are seats to be distributed, and they can distribute these freely among candidates from different parties. They can also decide to use only part of their votes. Not only is such an electoral system relatively rare, it is also characterized, in the Swiss context, by a very strong degree of elite-level coordination, resulting in a very limited number of competing candidates. This creates particular strategic incentives for voters, regarding both the number of votes they should cast, and how these are distributed. Central is the question of the degree of ideological concentration or dispersion of citizens' votes. This study shows that strategic considerations play a key role in explaining the number and ideological distributions of citizens' votes, and that this effect of tactical considerations is conditioned by respondents' level of political sophistication.