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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ejpolecoAltruistic punishment in elections[☆]Jason A. Aimone^{a,*}, Luigi Butera^b, Thomas Stratmann^c^a Baylor University, USA^b The University of Chicago, USA^c George Mason University, USA

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ABSTRACT

Altruistic punishment is a fundamental driver for cooperation in human interactions. In this paper, we expand our understanding of this form of pro-social behavior to help explain a puzzle of voting: why do individuals who are indifferent between two potential policy outcomes of an election participate when voting is costly? Using a simple voting experiment, we provide robust evidence that many voters are willing to engage in voting as a form of punishment, even when voting is costly and the voter has no monetary stake in the election outcome. In our sample, and in a robustness check through Monte Carlo simulation, we show that at least fourteen percent of individuals are willing to incur a cost to vote against candidates who broke their electoral promises, even when they have no pecuniary interest in the election outcome.

1. Introduction

Citizens' decisions about whether to vote and who to vote for are perhaps the most important topics analyzed in the field of political economy. Since the seminal works of [Downs \(1957\)](#) and [Riker and Ordeshook \(1968\)](#), voting models have progressed from exploring voting as a strategic decision that is instrumental to voters' material well-being, to studying voting as a political action that can, in itself, provide non-monetary expressive utility. That individuals derive utility from the act of voting can explain why people vote even when their material interests are unaffected by the electoral outcome, or when their vote is not pivotal ([Geys, 2006](#)). Altruistic punishment has been suggested to be a form of expressive voting ([Hillman, 2010](#)). For example, one may vote to punish a politician for breaking her or his campaign promises. Such a punishment expresses the voter's dissatisfaction, but little is known about the empirical relevance of this motive for voting. This paper attempts to fill this gap.

Research in other areas of decision-making has shown that altruistic punishment promotes cooperation and deters anti-social behavior in human societies ([Fehr and Fischbacher, 2003](#); [Boyd et al., 2003](#)). Altruistic punishment could therefore play an important role in supporting the long-term efficiency of political institutions ([Hamman et al., 2011](#)), particularly when it is difficult to set up formal rules and institutions that enhance accountability of political actors. However, a gap remains between the voting and altruistic punishment literatures. Possible reasons for this gap are due to the inherent difficulty of directly identifying voting motives in naturally occurring political voting environments. It is difficult to isolate a broken campaign promise from other political decisions, and it is difficult to isolate whether voter behavior is due to altruistic punishment motives and not due to strategic or other expressive voting motives.

In our laboratory experiment we study whether altruistic punishment motives can help explain voters' election turnout. This experiment includes two sequentially played-out elections where voting is costly, which provides voters with an incentive to abstain

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from voting. Additionally, we induce a portion of voters to be monetarily indifferent between the two policy platforms, which are the focus of campaign promises of the politicians. Promise breaking by politicians is an observable platform reversal, which generates a symmetric redistribution of wealth from one group of partisan voters to another, but does not result in any monetary gains or losses for indifferent voters. Our results show that more than one eighth of our monetarily indifferent voters choose to bear the cost of voting and to punish promise-breaking incumbents. This finding provides the first quantitative evidence that altruistic punishment is indeed a relevant phenomenon for political economy literature.

Our experimental design permits a clear identification of punishment preferences due to its focus on voters who are monetarily indifferent to the political platforms. This design feature helps us to bypass a potentially confounding factor when analyzing the motive of voting decisions. That is, our indifferent voters will not punish an elected politician because they receive a lower payoff due to the broken promise. This allows us to focus on voting motivation arising from the mere fact that the politician has broken a campaign promise. While we induce monetary indifference onto our experimental voters exogenously, indifferent voters are also potentially likely to appear in naturally occurring environments. For example, relatively indifferent voters may appear in primary elections and in two-party election environments when competing candidates “move to the center” and adopt similar platforms, as predicted by median voter models (Hotelling, 1929). Empirical data suggests that indifferent voters are not rare in modern electorates. This underlines the importance of generating empirical estimates about the role different motives play in voting decision. For example, Kosmidis and Xezonakis (2010) find that the percentage of undecided voters in the British General Election has risen from about a tenth of voters in 1967 to over a third of voters in 2005. Similarly, local elections, such as city council elections, are often non-partisan events with many voters being indifferent or unknowledgeable about the differences between candidates' stances on policy issues. Svava (2003), reports that 77% of American cities in 2001 used this type of non-partisan elections to elect their councils. Expressive voting concerns, such as altruistic punishment voting, become relatively more important in solving the paradox of voting in such environments where partisanship plays a reduced role.

We estimate that at least one-eighth of voters are willing to vote solely based on altruistic punishment preferences illustrating the importance of third-party punishment. In comparison to our findings in the laboratory, in naturally occurring elections, candidates' broken promises are likely to incentivize even more voters to express their displeasure from broken promises. This is because, in real elections, candidates' broken promises are likely to generate more tangible damages to voters. Similarly, since politicians invest their human and political capital to get into office, real life political betrayal can be perceived as intentionally deceptive and despicable. In contrast, in our experiment participants are randomly assigned to their roles and the incentives to break a promise are known to be exogenously provided by the experimenter, which would be expected to reduce the desire to punish.¹ Our lower-bound estimates are therefore externally valid in the sense that the characteristics of naturally occurring elections, excluded by design, are predicted to increase third-party punishment. For a robustness check of our experimental results, we also conduct a Monte Carlo simulation to provide further support to our significant experimental findings.²

Our paper explores the connections between expressive preferences in political environments and the role of social sanctioning in promoting the long-term preservation of social institutions, providing a bridge between two important strands of the public economics and political economy literatures. Past studies (see for example Fehr and Gächter, 2002, 2005) have found punishment, and the threat thereof, to be a valuable tool in promoting and sustaining cooperation and public goods provision. While it is conceivable that the same social norm could impact human behavior in different domains, it is less evident whether such expressive preferences for punishment have relevant consequences in the political election space. Knowing whether citizens - even those more removed from the consequences of elections - are motivated to incur a cost of voting to punish politicians who have reneged on their campaign promises is important, because developing and maintaining formal institutions that discipline politicians is costly.³

2. Background

Rational choice models tend to predict vanishing voter turnout in large-scale elections (Palfrey and Rosenthal, 1983; Ledyard, 1984; Palfrey and Rosenthal, 1985). Such a prediction appears to stand at odds with empirical evidence. Fiorina (1976, 1990) coined the failure of models that predict voter turnout as “the paradox that ate rational choice”.⁴ In response to the difficulty of explaining voting through the lenses of purely instrumental models, a parallel line of voting research has sought to explain voting by expressive voting (Brennan and Buchanan, 1984; Brennan and Lomasky, 1997; Posner, 2002; Tyran, 2004; Feddersen and Sandroni, 2006; Fowler, 2006; Hillman, 2010). Expressive voting is the notion that the act of voting itself can generate expressive utility. The nature of such expressive benefits vary: people may vote out of a sense of ethical obligation (Harsanyi, 1977; Blais, 2000; Feddersen and Sandroni, 2006); because they give in to social pressure (Gerber et al., 2008); to signal to both themselves and to others their moral and political positions (Lindbeck et al., 1999; Posner, 2002; Tyran, 2004; Houser et al., 2011; Della Vigna et al., 2014); or simply to cheer or express sympathy for a certain political view (Brennan and Hamlin, 1998). In a similar vein, recent experimental studies have shown that turnout is influenced by how campaign advertising is financed (Houser et al., 2011). Another important motive for

¹ In fact, reneging on a promise increases the overall welfare of candidates and voters.

² Such a simulation is not always part of an experimental study, but it is a useful technique to further verify that the statistically significant behavioral patterns that we identify as punishment are very unlikely to occur by random chance.

³ The presence of punishment of intentions in elections (because outcomes are irrelevant to indifferent voters) also supports the notion that retrospective voting represents an important element for electoral outcomes (see Fiorina, 1981; Svoboda, 1995; Tuft, 1975; Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979; Abramowitz et al., 1988).

⁴ See, for example, Feddersen (2004). For a recent review of behavioral political economy and the paradox of voting see Schnellenbach and Schubert (2015). Coate et al. (2008) provide evidence about the performance of pivotal-voter models in small scale elections.

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