



Multi-dimensional policy preferences in the 2015 British general election: A conjoint analysis

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ABSTRACT

This research explores voter preferences in the multi-dimensional policy space of the 2015 UK general election, as well as the influence of those preferences on vote choice. In our original pre-election survey, we apply a conjoint experimental design where we use actual party manifestos to examine voters' policy preferences across five main policy domains. This design allows us to both identify voters' sincere preferences, as estimated by their responses to hypothetical policy packages, and to reveal the influence of these preferences on voter support in the actual election. Our analysis reveals a considerable level of congruence between voters' underlying policy preferences and their vote choice in the 2015 election. Our results also speak to the previous literature on policy preferences and vote choice by demonstrating that voters not only weigh the importance of particular policy domains differently, but also have clear preferences regarding specific policy positions in a given domain, which eventually influence their support for a party in the election.

1. Introduction

Do voters care about parties' policy positions? To what extent do voters make decisions at the polls according to their policy preferences versus other non-policy considerations? These are the core questions tapping the key assumptions in one of the most predominant theories on electoral competition and voting behavior. On the one hand, in the tradition of spatial theory of electoral competition, voters are assumed to have well-defined policy preferences and make voting decisions by grasping the policies that political parties propose during an electoral campaign (e.g., Downs, 1957; Adams et al., 2005). On the other hand, non-policy considerations such as party image, party competency, and overall evaluations of government performance play an important role in voters' decisions in other theories, such as the so-called “valence voting” or “issue competence” model (e.g., Stokes, 1992; Clarke et al., 2011). Given this, understanding voters' awareness of and responses to parties' policy position-taking is of crucial importance, as these are foundational mechanisms for the electoral competition of parties (e.g., Ezrow et al., 2011; Klüver and Spoon, 2016), its consequences (e.g., Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000), and, ultimately, the functioning of representative democracies.

This paper is one such effort. In particular, we assess voter responses to policy issues in the 2015 UK general election, using an original pre-electoral survey with an embedded conjoint experiment. In the specific

election under investigation, the Conservative Party won a parliamentary majority, and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) enjoyed increased support in the popular vote. Within this context, different theoretical approaches provide distinct perspectives on the role of policy preferences in vote choice. However, we argue that there are several critical limitations when using the typical survey questions to measure the core concepts of these theories. These limitations include the endogeneity problem (or the possibility of reverse causality), whereby vote choice (the outcome) could also influence the core explanatory variables, such as the perceived policy positions of parties (e.g., in the spatial model of voting) and the evaluation of parties' issue competencies (e.g., in the issue competence model). Moreover, there are limitations to exploring policy preferences and vote choice using survey questions, most notably vis-à-vis the multidimensional policy preferences underlying a voter's single choice. In every election, political parties propose policies as a package in the form of party manifestos, and it is likely that voters respond to multiple policy concerns when evaluating the policy packages.

In this article, we explore the multidimensional structure of voter policy preferences and its relationship to vote choice. First, we investigate whether voters respond to policies presented outside the context of real-world party politics (i.e., without party labels), and if so, to what extent those underlying policy preferences are reflected in actual vote choices in the 2015 general election. Second, we rank-order the popularity of policy packages proposed by major parties and assess the importance of that popularity for each party's electoral performance. We examine different sub-groups of voters and investigate the

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Suppose that two parties with the issue positions described below had nominated candidates in the general election. Which of these two candidates would you be most likely to vote for? Even if you are not entirely sure, please choose the one that you most prefer.

	Party A	Party B
EU	Leave the EU	Hold a referendum on Britain's EU membership
Jobs	Allow firms to prioritise British citizens for jobs	Extend apprenticeships and vocational training
Deficit and the economy	Eliminate the deficit during the next parliament	End austerity and reverse public sector cuts
Education	Create more free schools	No university tuition fees for natural science students
Immigration	Restore full entry and exit border checks	Four-year wait before EU migrants can claim benefits

Which candidate would you support?

Candidate from Party A

Candidate from Party B



Fig. 1. An example of a conjoint table (screenshot).

differences and similarities in their policy preferences. Finally, our analyses also examine whether voters prefer the policy package proposed by the party they intended to support over the packages proposed by other parties.

To carry out this analysis, we use a conjoint survey experiment that allows us to estimate the relative importance of individual policy positions in various policy domains, as well as which policies are particularly influential for electoral support among specific subsets of voters. For our conjoint survey experiment, we constructed a set of major issues during the election period using news coverage and party manifestos. We then presented survey respondents with two hypothetical policy packages randomly constructed from policy positions on the major issues and asked them to choose their preferred policy package.

Our conjoint design is analogous to the design implemented by Horiuchi et al. (2018) for the 2014 general election in Japan, in the sense that the policy components used to build up hypothetical policy packages in the experiment are derived from actual party manifestos. Their analyses concluded that policy preferences mattered little for voters' choice in the election: the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, a governing party that enjoyed a decisive victory, had proposed a policy package that turned out to be one of the least popular among the general electorate. We find a quite different story in the UK 2015 general election: there is considerable congruence between voters' preferences for party policy packages and their vote choices. In particular, supporters of the parties with the three largest vote shares – the Conservatives, Labour, and UKIP – clearly preferred the policy package of the party for which they intended to vote.

In the following two sections, we provide a brief description of the

context of the election and discuss how the insights from our conjoint analysis compare to the way existing theories would interpret the election results. By highlighting the potential shortcomings of conventional survey-based approaches, our research shows how conjoint experiments can be an effective tool for advancing our understanding of the role of voters' policy preferences. In Section 4, we document the methodology used for our conjoint design. We then discuss the results and implications, focusing on the similarities and differences between conventional survey data analysis and our conjoint analysis in order to push forward our understanding of voters' decision making in the 2015 British election.

2. The 2015 British general election

The UK 2015 general election was held on May 7, 2015 after the scheduled end-of-term dissolution of Parliament. The Conservatives won enough votes to secure the outright majority of seats – 36.1 percent of votes, with a decisive margin of 7.1 percentage points over Labour. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) placed third, with 12.6 percent of votes, although it secured only one seat due to the party's geographically dispersed support and lack of resources (Cutts et al., 2017). The Scottish National Party (SNP), which placed fourth overall, swept the Scottish constituencies, winning more than 95 percent of the seats allocated to Scotland.

Two major political events in 2014 foreshadowed the electoral success of the SNP and UKIP. The first was the Scottish referendum for independence. Although the 'No' side won by a narrow margin, the result manifested the growing support for the SNP (Fieldhouse and

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