



The role of the political context in voting indecision[☆]



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ABSTRACT

A substantive portion of the electorate declares in pre-electoral surveys that they are undecided. However, little has been done in trying to understand who these voters are and how they finally decide their vote. In this article, we try to advance the literature by disentangling the circumstances under which voters are more likely to be undecided. While the traditional approach to the study of electoral indecision has been to characterize which individual traits make voters more likely to be undecided, this article provides consistent evidence showing that key elements of the political context may also affect electoral indecision. Using long-term harmonized data from Spanish pre-electoral surveys over 30 years, we find that voting indecision is influenced by two different types of contextual factors. First, there are some political contexts that reduce voters' cognitive costs when deciding their vote, i.e. the level of electoral competitiveness and the number of parties competing in the elections. Second, there are other political contexts that increase voters' social or expressive costs, i.e. the level of government popularity, since costs of expressing preference for the party in government increases when its public image is undermined.

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1. Introduction

A minor but relevant portion of the electorate in democratic countries gets to the last weeks of the electoral campaign without having made up their minds about which party to vote for. The electorate who delays its vote choice until the late stages of the political campaign represents more than one out of five voters in most

consolidated democracies and this number has been increasing over recent decades (Dalton et al., 2000).² Although there are well-grounded suspicions that surveys tend to over report the number of undecided voters, the existence of such a percentage of respondents who do not declare their vote intention in pre-electoral surveys generates significant uncertainties in predicting electoral outcomes. This is particularly true if we take into account that a significant proportion of this electorate does not finally abstain on the Election Day and may actually end up being crucial for the outcome in contested elections.

The study of who undecided voters are and how they end up voting has attracted the attention of many scholars.

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² This portion of the electorate represents 23% in the US (Nir and Druckman, 2008), about 20% in Germany (where, for instance, in the 2005 elections 9% of voters decided their vote on election day itself) and around 15% in Spain in recent elections.

This is so because this electorate is very much the target of the activation strategies that political parties and leaders develop during electoral campaigns (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Indeed, for the classical literature on the effects of electoral campaigns, the relevance of undecided voters stems from the fact that a necessary condition (although clearly not a sufficient one) for political campaigns to influence the electoral outcome is to have voters with some degree of uncertainty about their final decision who can be persuaded before the elections.³

The academic interest in undecided voters is generally focused on studying when and how these voters end up deciding their vote.⁴ Yet, too often the traditional approach has been to treat undecided voters as a stable, clearly distinguishable electorate. Certainly, in this regard undecided voters are too often conceptualized in much the same way as party identification or other enduring political attitudes.

The literature gives a fairly consistent profile of the main socio-economic and political traits of the undecided voters. Existing research usually characterizes them as individuals with lower levels of education, weaker political preferences and lesser interest in politics.⁵ Indecision is also associated with demographics: women and younger voters are more likely to reach the late stages of a campaign without a decision about whom to vote for (Fournier et al., 2004). Among all the above factors, the standard conclusion is that weaker political preferences, and in particular party identification, are the most correlated with being undecided. Yet to say that they follow politics less closely than decided voters does not mean that they do not hold values, beliefs, and attitudes that bear directly on politics influencing their voting decisions.

In sum, according to the literature, undecided voters may be briefly described as less politicized people ‘who care little and know less’ (Chaffee and Nath Rimal, 1996: 269). However, most research fails to consider that voters’ uncertainty may also depend upon the particular conditions surrounding the voting decision and not only on

voters’ personal traits. A remarkable exception were Mendelsohn and O’Keefe (1976) who concluded in their study of the Ohio elections that the ‘difficulty of voter decision making appears primarily to be a function of circumstances of a particular campaign rather than a characteristic of certain voters *per se*’ (p. 328). Using panel data, the authors found that only 5% of the electorate declared not to have a clear vote decision in both the 1972 and 1974 elections. Albeit there were common attributes among these voters (less educated, less politically knowledgeable, younger and less attentive to politics), undecided voters were not the same group of individuals from one election to another.

In sum, is it reasonable to consider electoral indecision only as a result of certain voters’ personal attributes? Or does voting indecision also stem from specific characteristics of the political context? In this paper, we argue that it is misleading to consider electoral indecision uniquely as the result of certain stable personal traits of the electorate. Thus, we will provide evidence in the following pages that being undecided is also contingent upon the political context of each election.

In order to investigate whether indecision depends on the circumstances that surround voters’ choice, we study the contextual determinants of being undecided in Spain from 1982 to 2012 by taking into account all those elections at different territorial levels (in particular, EU, National and Regional levels) where pre-electoral studies are available. In total, we have been able to collect data for 135 elections, although some of them lack the necessary information to be included in some of our analyses. Using Spain as a single case study over time introduces two key features for the appropriate study of the electoral behavior of undecided voters. First, it provides an important degree of regularity in the institutional and political contexts in each of the electoral arenas analyzed over time. Second, it offers a high degree of comparability for most of the pre-electoral surveys used as they were carried out by the same opinion poll institution and are based on a similar methodology in terms of the design of the questionnaires and the gathering of the data over time.

The Spanish institutional design – and, in particular, its electoral and party systems – is common in many countries. In fact, according to the International IDEA group,⁶ the Spanish List PR system is the most widespread in the world (around 38% of the countries use this system in their legislative elections). There is no doubt that this indeed increases the potential external validity of our case study and the scope of our findings.

The paper is structured as follows. In the following section, we review the existing literature. In Section 3 we introduce our research hypotheses to be tested. In Section 4 we describe our dataset with the 135 Spanish pre-electoral surveys, the variables we employ to test our hypotheses and the methods used. In Section 5 we report the results. Finally, in Section 6 we end the paper with some concluding remarks.

³ It is possible that undecided voters are more likely to be persuaded by political messages. Yet, they must also be exposed to and have received them. No campaign can be successful with persuadable voters who are inattentive to political messages (Zaller, 1992).

⁴ Most of the literature on this field has been interested in two different topics: (a) the time of their vote decision and (b) what determines such a decision. Regarding the former, research has found that the volume of undecided voters follows an electoral cycle (Irwin and Van Holsteyn, 2008). As for the second, Chaffee and Nath Rimal (1996) and Fournier et al. (2004) suggest that late deciders are more vulnerable to campaign events. Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous (1994) find that late deciders in the US are less predictable than decided voters and that they are also less influenced by the conventional factors that traditionally influence vote choice. Finally, Lavine (2001) and Kosmidis and Xezonakis (2010) find that the determinants of vote choice of decided and undecided voters significantly differ: while the former group are more likely to be affected by the candidate’s personal traits, the latter take the economy more into consideration.

⁵ See for instance, Chaffee and Choe (1980) for the 1976 US presidential elections, Kosmidis and Xezonakis (2010) for the 2005 UK general election, Barisione (2001) for the French and Italian case in the 1990s, Martínez and Orriols (forthcoming 2014) for Spain (1986–2011), Lisi (2010) for the Greek and Portuguese cases in the 2000s and Fournier et al. (2004) for Canada.

⁶ <http://www.idea.int/esd/>.

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