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Heterogeneity and the calculus of turnout: Undecided respondents and the campaign dynamics of civic duty

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ABSTRACT

Accounts of turnout often maintain that citizens participate in elections because the expressive, instrumental and normative benefits associated with the act of voting outweigh the respective costs. Although the impact of those benefits has been empirically assessed in many studies, we know little about when and for whom this impact is stronger. To this end, this paper examines 1) how the effect of those benefits and particularly that of civic duty increases over the election campaign and 2) whether this increase can be attributed to voter heterogeneity. Survey respondents who have not yet decided how they are going to vote will be increasingly swayed to cast a vote on the basis of their civic duty and not other predictors of turnout. The empirical hypotheses are being tested by utilising recent rolling cross-section election studies from Britain. The results suggest that the influence of civic duty on turnout is stable for decided but increases for undecided voters the closer the election day looms.

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1. Introduction

Citizens are often assumed to calculate the costs and the benefits of their future actions and decide whether they will eventually turnout. Their instrumental benefits denote the utility they receive from seeing their preferences (policies, parties or candidates) represented in government. Such considerations along with "expressive" partisan attachments and normative benefits related to civic duty tend to inform their calculus (Brennan and Hamlin, 1998; Schuessler, 2000; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Blais, 2000). For many turnout models, these considerations are assumed to be uniform across the electorate and temporally "fixed".

This study, in contrast, theorises that electoral proximity (i.e. *the daily countdown before election day*) enhances the importance of certain predictors on turnout.[1] On this account, the impact of considerations like the sense of civic duty are expected to be amplified the closer the election day looms. It is being argued that the election day is the 'deadline' for voters to make a decision and this time pressure is reflected on the weight they place on different considerations at different time points in the campaign. In line with the 'deadline' proposition, the paper further tests whether the temporally dependent effect of civic duty on turnout is uniform across the electorate or heterogeneous voter segments accord more weight on civic duty in the final days of the campaigns. The main source of heterogeneity is whether a citizen is decided or undecided for whom she will vote (Kosmidis and Xezonakis, 2010; Chaffee and Choe, 1980; Chaffee and Rimal, 1996; Fournier et al., 2004; Nir and Druckman, 2008; Henderson et al., 2010).

The analyses are based on survey data that can capture the varying impact of turnout predictors via the rolling cross-section (RCS) component (see Johnston and Brady, 2002; Brady and Johnston, 2006). The empirical analyses of the article use the RCS component for predictors and the respective post election wave to measure turnout. The empirical results show that for decided respondents

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[1] Throughout the paper I discuss the causal importance of various considerations within the voting calculus and not how the levels of, e.g. political interest, increase or decrease during the campaign.

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(*reported vote intention*) the importance of civic duty is stable across the campaign while for undecided respondents (*reported indecision*) the same effect increases over the course of the campaign.[2] This finding is theoretically plausible and in line with other studies that have reported heterogeneity in the influence of civic duty (Gerber and Green, 2000a; Großer and Schram, 2010). The theoretical argument posits that for undecided respondents, the calculus of voting will be heavily influenced by this sense of civic duty because expressive benefits, like party identification, are not strong and their instrumental benefits have already failed to predict a prompt vote intention. As a consequence, the importance of their sense of duty will be heightened the closer the election day looms.

This article aspires to 1) inform the literature on the classical downsian model, 2) expand on the literature about campaigns and turnout and 3) add to the limited work on the undecided voters. With respect to the former, this paper seeks to add useful dimensions in the Calculus of Voting that could enhance its predictive accuracy and thus illuminate how the same parameters can make better predictions for different voters at different points in time. This way we can learn more about how campaigns could affect aggregate turnout and gain insights into the behaviour of a ubiquitous voting group like the undecided voters.

In the following Section review the infamous paradox of voting; I then discuss voter and temporal heterogeneity. This discussion leads to the theoretical arguments informing the hypotheses to be tested. After that, I describe the data, specify the statistical models and present the results from the empirical analyses. In the final Section summarise the theoretical and empirical implications of this research.

2. Background & hypotheses

2.1. Calculus of voting

According to the oft-cited calculus of voting, voters have goals and seek to achieve them in the most efficient way possible (Downs, 1957). Behaviour is, accordingly, conditioned by the individual's perceptions of the costs and benefits that accrue to themselves. In other words, the decision to participate will be made in response to whether the costs of voting (C) (e.g. registration, going to polling station, gathering information) are larger than the associated benefits (B) (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Blais, 2000; Blais et al., 2000; Panagopoulos, 2008; Clarke et al., 2004). The benefits, in turn, will be conditional upon the extent to which the individual vote is decisive in determining the election. In its original formulation the calculus of voting is derived as follows:

$$\pi B > C$$

In the above inequality, the principal consideration is '*B*' as it represents the citizens' instrumental benefit from seeing their preferred candidate, policy or party winning the election. The *Benefits* term, however, is conditional on the extent to which voters consider themselves to be pivotal in deciding election outcomes. And this is where strictly instrumental considerations fail to predict large number of electors. In large scale elections, according to the downsian model, it is irrational to vote because even if the benefits (B) from seeing ones preferred party in power are very large, the probability that ones vote is decisive (π) is infinitesimal (Grofman, 1993; Larcinese, 2007).

Most citizens, however, do vote and some of them do so repeatedly. Downs (1957) attempted to explain the empirical deficit of his model by assuming psychic or consumption benefits from voting. His proposition suggested that voters participate to maintain and support the democratic system. Similar explanations for this "paradox" posit that voters tend to distort the perceptions of their benefits by relying on these normative and psychic considerations. In effect, the original calculus of voting is often modified by the proposition that voters obtain a benefit from merely exercising or performing their citizen duty to vote (the '*D*' term) (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). Riker and Ordershook (1968) modified the equation as follows[3]:

$$\pi B + D > C$$

Even though these consumption parameters (generally represented by the '*D*' term) were often related to different psychic and normative benefits, civic duty has been at the centre of scholarly attention. Blais (2000) suggests the following useful definition:

> "*I define [civic] duty as the "belief that not voting in a democracy is wrong". Sense of duty thus corresponds to an ethical judgment that voting is right and not voting is wrong. If someone votes out of a sense of duty, she votes because her conscience tell her she ought to vote; she would feel ashamed and guilty if she were not to vote.* (2000:93)"

In Blais' terms, the variation in the sense of civic duty corresponds to the varying presence of a guilt stemming from non voting. Although, this solution comes with some theoretical (and empirical) shortcomings, this sense of duty is the solution to the turnout paradox.[4]

While in most cases the discussions either focus on the above paradox or the unconditional impact of the parameters, this paper departs from the traditional calculus of turnout and seeks to understand how the three types of considerations (instrumental, expressive and normative benefits) of the model work for different voters at different time-points in the campaign. In other words, the paper's theoretical argumentation and contribution lies in the relaxation of two key assumptions embedded in these

[2] I use the term 'respondents' to describe their status as units of a survey sample. The terms 'undecided citizens' or 'undecided voters' are also used and they describe the same group of people.

[3] Riker and Ordeshook suggested a variety of psychic benefits including Down's proposition about system support. The characterisations of these benefits as psychic, normative or consumption benefits describe the same concept and are being used interchangeably.

[4] The theoretical and empirical shortcomings are discussed at later sections of the paper.

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