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Past is still present: Micro-level comparisons of conventional vs. transitional economic voting in three Polish elections

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ABSTRACT

Using survey data from three Polish parliamentary elections, we provide the first systematic micro-level test contrasting a standard incumbency-based model of economic voting with a transitional economic voting model in the post-communist context. To do so, we introduce a novel temporal component to micro-level studies of economic voting that supplements standard short-term retrospective economic evaluations (e.g., "do you feel the economy has improved in the past 12 months?") with longer "transitional" retrospective economic evaluations (e.g., "do you feel the economy has improved since the collapse of communism?"). Our analyses reveal a nuanced picture suggesting multiple paths for economic influences on voting in Poland. We find evidence consistent with the standard incumbency-based approach, but only for the specific set of evaluations to which the theory is most appropriately applied: short-term retrospective economic evaluations and the vote for incumbent parties. By contrast, the transitional model is strongly supported by evidence that evaluations of changes in economic conditions since the collapse of communism ("long-term economic evaluations") have an effect on the vote for a range of parties. We demonstrate as well that these results are robust to model specification and generational effects.

1. Introduction

Since the publication of Gerald Kramer's landmark *APSR* article "Short-Term Fluctuations in U.S. Voting Behavior" over 45 years ago, scholars have been fascinated with trying to understand the relationship between economic conditions, voting behavior, and election results (Kramer, 1971). Originally, the vast majority of this research focused on economic voting within the relatively stable two-party system of the United States. Not surprisingly, almost all of the theoretical energy of this endeavor was focused on better understanding the relationship between economic conditions and incumbent political parties' vote share; in a two-party system, such a model can sufficiently characterize the effect of the economy on the entire electorate. As studies of economic voting spread beyond the United States, initially into other advanced industrial democracies, attention to the political context in which elections were held led to new avenues of theoretical inquiry concerning the context in which economic conditions might have more or less of an effect on the vote for incumbent parties (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Anderson, 2007). More recently, studies of economic voting in post-communist countries – responding to the fact that incumbency-centered approaches have a limited scope in multi-party systems, and, especially, multi-party systems with large numbers of new and unstable parties – have tended to

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examine the effect of economic conditions on a much wider range of political parties, including but not limited to incumbent parties.

While some of this new work has examined the effect of the economy systematically on ever major party competing in an election (Gibson and Cielecka, 1995; Bell, 1997), other studies have considered a context-specific theory grounded in the transition from communism. The central theoretical question for these studies has been whether the lineage and affiliation of current political parties *vis a vis* the communist past and the transition away from communism influence the relationship between economic conditions and electoral support (Fidrmuc, 2000a,b; Jackson et al., 2003b, 2005; Tucker, 2006). Tucker (2006), for example, offers a "Transitional Identity Model" of economic voting, whereby "New Regime" parties, or those parties that are primarily identified with the transition away from communism and the implementation of market reforms, are predicted to perform better in parts of the country with better economic conditions. Conversely, "Old Regime" parties, or parties descended from the old ruling communist parties, are predicted to perform better in parts of the country where the economy is worse.[1]

While these recent studies employ somewhat different theoretical motivations, adopt different nomenclature, and consider different cases, they are unified in their use of aggregate-level data. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to extend this line of research to micro-level tests of individual voting decisions. Thus in examining the effect of attitudes about economic conditions on vote choice in three Polish parliamentary elections, we provide the first micro-level study explicitly contrasting the predictions of a standard incumbency-based model of economic voting (hereafter "conventional economic voting" or the "conventional model") and these newer transitional economic voting models (hereafter, "transitional economic voting" or the "transitional model").

Our study also makes a second important theoretical and empirical contribution to the economic voting literature by extending existing theories to account for the temporal dynamics of regime transition. More specifically, we make the theoretical argument that individuals' beliefs about changes in economic conditions since the fall of communism can continue to exert a "long-term economic effect" on vote choice just as evaluations of economic conditions over recent months can have a "short-term economic effect" on voting. We test this novel claim empirically using a new measurement of voter perceptions that measures longer, "transitional" retrospective economic evaluations (e.g., "do you feel the economy has improved since the collapse of communism?") in addition to standard measures of short-term retrospective evaluations (e.g., "do you feel the economy has improved in the past 12 months?").

The empirical findings of our analyses of the 1997, 2001, and 2005 Polish parliamentary elections are nuanced but clear. We do find some evidence of support for the conventional incumbency model – which should come as a relief to those who believe that support for such a model is an important prerequisite for establishing accountable democratic governance – but this evidence is limited to the specific set of evaluations for which the theory is most clearly intended: short-term retrospective economic evaluations and the vote for incumbent parties. The transitional economic voting model, on the other hand, is strongly supported by tests of longer-term economic evaluations across a range of parties. Moreover, we even find some support for the transitional model in predicting the effect of short-term economic evaluations on the vote for opposition parties. Thus as in established democracies, Polish voters do not hesitate to blame or reward incumbent parties for short-term changes in the state of the economy; otherwise, though, the effect of economic perceptions on vote choice is very much in line with the predictions of the transitional model. Moreover, these results are remarkably robust to re-estimating all of our analyses using an alternative dependent variable of party affect as opposed to vote choice. In the remainder of this paper, we elaborate on our theoretical arguments, supply some contextual information on the three Polish elections analyzed, and present our empirical analyses.

2. Models of economic voting

A wealth of evidence suggests that economic conditions exert a substantial effect on election outcomes in established democracies.[2] The emergence of competitive multi-party elections in East-Central Europe following the collapse of communism has presented an opportunity for further testing of existing models of economic voting and, perhaps even more importantly, new theorizing about the effect of the economy on elections in transition countries. In the remainder of this section, therefore, we present two potential models of economic voting in transitional countries. The first follows the dominant strand of the economic voting literature in established democracies by focusing on voting for or against incumbent parties. The second draws on recent work on economic voting in post-communist countries We employ the nomenclature of Tucker (2006) for the remainder of this article to hypothesize about the effect of economic conditions on the vote for particular "types" of political parties.

In its most straightforward form, the predominant model of economic voting employed in studies of established democracies expects that voters will tend to punish the incumbent in bad economic times and reward the incumbent when the economy is doing well. In this framework, elections function much like referenda on economic conditions during the incumbent party's term in office. Scholars have produced a vast amount of evidence supporting this basic premise using both macro and

[1] We employ the nomenclature of Tucker (2006) for the remainder of this article.

[2] For a review of the literature in established democracies, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Anderson, 2007. For a review focused on post-communist countries, see Tucker, 2002, pp. 292–295.