

Strategic voting in German constituencies

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Abstract

We investigate strategic voting at German *Bundestag* elections. The common intuition about strategic voting holds that supporters of small party candidates split their ticket and cast a constituency vote for the candidate of a viable large party. We show that there is more potential for strategic voting than previously admitted. Based on the multiparty calculus of voting framework, we formulate a decision-theoretic model that allows us to take the full range of situations into account, that voters may encounter in their local constituencies. Applying this model to survey data from the 1998 and 2002 federal elections, we find that voters make use of sophisticated balloting, given the chance to influence the outcome of the constituency election. While the focus of this paper is on Germany, the approach we take is applicable to single seat elections in other countries as well.

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1. Introduction

In every general election roughly half the members of the German parliament (*Bundestag*) are elected from local constituencies. In each constituency, a single seat is awarded to the candidate who wins a plurality of the vote. All other votes are discarded. Such “winner takes all” or “first past the post” (FPTP) election rules disfavor candidates with low electoral prospects and make any vote for such candidates essentially wasted. To avoid wasting their vote on hopeless candidates voters sometimes switch to less preferred but more promising candidates, usually one of the top two contenders. Such voting behavior is termed strategic

or tactical and it differs from naïve voting insofar as voters deliberately seek to influence the outcome of the election instead of merely revealing their preference for a certain candidate.

Strategic voting is interesting insofar as electoral outcomes are not pre-determined by voters’ preferences, which are more or less stable over the course of an election, but also by short-term swings in support from weak to strong candidates. If voters are short-term responsive to the electoral situation, strong candidates, in a close race, will be able to attract votes from supporters of weaker candidates. The extent to which voters adjust their behavior to the electoral situation thus has important implications for party strategy. For example, in running constituency campaigns, parties of the leading candidates may draw off support from weaker candidates by portraying the situation as a neck-and-neck race. In this paper we will examine the responsiveness of German voters to electoral competition in single

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seat elections. We ask: Do German voters cast strategic candidate votes? An answer to this question might help evaluate the potential of parties to influence constituency outcomes and also contribute to our understanding of the boundaries of voter sophistication in German federal elections.

When designing the German electoral system after World War II, the idea of adopting a pure FPTP system had strong support among several members of the parliamentary council. Post-war military government and the Christian Democrats (with support from the German Party, DP) strongly favored FPTP over proportional representation (PR). However, opposition by Social Democrats and the Liberal Party eventually led to the adoption of a mixture of PR and single seat constituencies, which is hitherto employed in federal elections (Bawn, 1993). Despite their long-standing presence in German politics, constituency elections have not received much scholarly attention.¹ Common wisdom among observers and scholars of German politics, as well as most German voters, suggests that the PR vote is more important than the constituency vote for determining parties' seat shares in parliament. Electoral law prescribes that constituency candidates merely fill seats allocated to their party according to proportional representation. Under normal circumstances, they do not add extra seats to their party. Consequently one might argue that voters should not care very much about who wins their constituency since it would not affect parties' seat shares in parliament. Notwithstanding such claims, we believe there are at least three reasons why the constituency ballot should be important to voters.

First, the importance of the PR over the candidate vote is to a large part an empirical phenomenon not an institutional fact. Electoral law guarantees successful constituency candidates a mandate even if their party's state-wide share of PR votes provided them with an insufficient number of parliamentary seats. Such excess seats (*Überhangmandate*) increase parties' seat shares beyond the level of regular PR allocation. While excess seats have long been considered unlikely and rare, their occurrence has markedly increased in the post reunification period. On average 3.5% of all constituency candidates since 1990 obtained excess seats. The most recent election of 2005 even witnessed an all time high of 5%. Winning those additional seats may be decisive for forming governmental majorities. As it is somewhat hard to predict, though, which constituencies will be more likely to yield excess seats, any

constituency outcome bears some importance and thus voters should care about it.

Second, even if most seats are allocated according to PR, it may still play a role for the individual voter, whether those seats are filled with rank-and-file party delegates or representatives from their local environment. Nomination of constituency candidates is normally carried out by small boards of local party delegates (*Kreisdelegiertenversammlungen*), with little outside influence by higher party executives. Party list members, by contrast, are elected on state-wide party conventions (*Landesparteitage*). Thus, while list members are likely to be selected on the basis of partisan assets (such as loyalty, ideology or technocratic skill), nomination of constituency candidates should be rather guided by their overall attractiveness to local constituents, not only to partisans but voters in general. The greater detachedness of constituency candidates from their party grassroots creates a subtle incentive for supporters of hopeless candidates to cast an alternative vote: As a typical example, consider a supporter of the FDP in a constituency where the margin of victory between CDU and SPD candidates is small. Assuming her second preference is CDU, she might ask herself: 'Given that my vote will be decisive, does it make a difference if I switched to the candidate of CDU?' The answer is yes, because if the CDU candidate gets elected he will fill a seat that would otherwise fall to a "faceless" party list member who does not hold any interest whatsoever in her constituency. By giving her vote to the CDU candidate the voter may effectively increase the similarity between CDU and herself as a constituent. Thus even if the constituency outcome would not alter parties' seat shares in parliament, influencing the composition of parliamentary fractions still serves as a motive for sophisticated balloting.

A third argument for the importance of constituency elections is also tied to candidates' party affiliation. Given that a voter evaluates candidates mainly on the basis of their party affiliation, it should not be irrelevant to her, whether she is being represented by a candidate from one or another party. Hence if the candidate from her preferred party is out of the race, she should be likely to switch to the candidate of a less preferred party in order to avoid the victory of a candidate from a party she does not like at all.

Taken together, we believe that there are good reasons for voters to care about the outcome of constituency elections and to vote strategically. The extent to which German voters actually make use of strategic balloting is ultimately an empirical question and we address it accordingly. Our findings suggest that German

¹ See Wüst et al. (2006) for a recent counter-example.

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