



More than wishful thinking: Causes and consequences of voters' electoral expectations about parties and coalitions

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 May 2009

Received in revised form 27 July 2011

Accepted 5 August 2011

Keywords:

Wishful thinking

Electoral expectations

Strategic voting

Bandwagon effect

ABSTRACT

Accurate expectations about the outcome of elections play a central role in psychological and economic theories of voting. In the paper, three questions about voters' expectations are investigated. First, we identify and test several factors that influence the overall accuracy or quality of voters' expectations. Second, the phenomenon of "wishful thinking" is tested and confirmed for expectations about the electoral performance of individual parties and coalitions. Finally, two mechanisms how expectations might influence voting behavior are identified and tested. Based on surveys from Austria and Germany, the results suggest that voters not only rely on expectations to avoid casting "wasted" votes for parties without electoral chances, but that they are able to engage in fairly sophisticated strategic coalition voting.

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1. Introduction

Are voters able to form accurate expectations about election outcomes, and do these expectations matter? To answer these questions, we start with the observation that media coverage of polls during political campaigns is extensive, giving even voters without much interest in politics an opportunity to learn rather sophisticated information about an upcoming election (Brettschneider, 2000, 2003). If voters choose to do so, they can use this readily available information to form fairly accurate expectations. Game theoretic

models of voting assume strategic coordination, that is, voters have to be able to form expectations about the behavior of other voters and thus the outcome of the upcoming election in order to maximize the expected utility of their own voting decision (Cox, 1997; McKelvey and Patty, 2006). Polls (and knowledge of election histories) can serve as a coordination signal (Forsythe et al., 1993; Gschwend, 2007). Similar assumptions are made, explicitly or implicitly, by psychological theories such as the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) or the bandwagon and underdog effect (Mutz, 1998; Simon, 1954). Empirical research on voters' electoral expectations, however, takes a rather skeptical view of the claim that voters are able to form highly accurate expectations. Voters with strong partisan preferences tend to engage in wishful thinking and overestimate the chances of preferred parties and candidates and/or underestimate the chances of disliked parties and candidates (Mutz, 1998). As a consequence, voters' expectations appear to be a mix of objective, factual poll information and preference-driven projections (e.g. Blais and Bodet, 2006; Meffert and Gschwend, 2011).

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Because most previous research has focused on majoritarian U.S. or British party systems, we focus on multiparty systems and assess the ability of Austrian and German voters to form expectations about election outcomes as well as the subsequent electoral consequences of these expectations. More specifically, we first identify and test several factors that influence the *overall* accuracy and quality of voters' expectations. Second, the phenomenon of wishful thinking is tested and confirmed for expectations about the electoral performance of *individual* parties and extended to judgments about coalitions. The lack of research on the latter constitutes a striking gap in the literature. Finally, two mechanisms how expectations might influence voting behavior are identified and tested, in particular strategic voting and the bandwagon effect. The analyses are based on two general population surveys from Austria and Germany that measured voters' expectations in unusual detail. The following review will focus first on the sources of voters' expectations, followed by the consequences for voting behavior.

2. Sources of voters' electoral expectations

The formation of meaningful expectations about electoral outcomes requires current and precise information. What might appear to be a challenging task, given the well-known low levels of factual political knowledge of many voters (Zaller, 1992), can be accomplished rather easily. The media coverage of national political campaigns spends considerable time reporting results and trends based on frequent pre-election polls (Brettschneider, 2000, 2003). The reality, of course, is more complex. First, even professional polls do not always accurately predict the election outcome (as was the case in the Austrian and German general elections analyzed here). Second, the (German) media coverage is dominated by subjective claims and assessments by journalists and politicians that are not constrained in any way by professional polls (Donsbach and Weisbach, 2005). As a starting point, it is nevertheless reasonable to assume that voters have fairly easy access to objective and for the most part fairly accurate information about the electoral chances of parties during political campaigns. The more interesting question is about the recipients of such information—whether and how voters actually acquire this information to form accurate expectations.

According to the pertinent literature, starting with the classic study *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), voters' expectations frequently seem to follow a different logic. Despite ready access to objective poll information, the literature finds fairly consistent wishful thinking effects, that is, perceptions distorted by existing political preferences. Voters (like sports fans) seem to engage in strong and consistent wishful thinking in favor of the home team (Abramson et al., 1992; Babad et al., 1992; Babad and Yacobus, 1993; Granberg and Brent, 1983; Uhlener and Grofman, 1986). In addition, wishful thinking appears to be one of the few effects that are reliably found in survey research studies but that are very difficult to recreate in laboratory settings. Carefully designed experiments often fail to show any remarkable wishful thinking effects (e.g. Bar-Hillel and Budescu, 1995). Price (2000) suggests a number

of explanations, in particular that people's social interactions in real life are highly selective, and that the (induced) preferences in the laboratory are not sufficient to produce wishful thinking effects. In his own analysis, Price (2000) shows that the latter problem can be addressed by a carefully designed desirability manipulation (involving two competing social groups). Because the analyses reported in our paper draw on partisan preferences in real world settings, the presence of wishful thinking can be considered as fairly certain and similar to previous studies.

But how can the fact that voters engage in wishful thinking despite easy access to accurate poll information be reconciled? In multiparty systems, it will be useful to differentiate between the *overall* accuracy or quality of voters' expectations and the tendency to distort the expectations for *specific* preferred or disliked parties. The overall quality of expectations should benefit from ready access to poll information, while not precluding distortions for specific parties. Once strong partisan predispositions come into play along with polls that contradict preferred outcomes, factual information will quickly lose its luster.

The literature offers many explanations that can be narrowed down to a number of factors that might explain the overall quality of voters' expectations and/or the tendency to engage in wishful thinking. The following review categorizes the factors in political motivations such as partisan preferences and non-partisan political knowledge as well as rational or strategic considerations and social context.

2.1. Partisan and non-partisan political motivations

Partisan preferences, in particular party identification, exert a powerful influence over political attitudes and perceptions (Bartels, 2002). Thus, it is hardly surprising that voters' expectations about electoral outcomes should be affected by these preferences. A partisan preference implies a strong directional motivation that favors preferred outcomes or parties over disliked outcomes or parties. Psychologically, both motivational and cognitive mechanisms have been proposed to explain this self-serving misperception (Babad, 1995, 1997; Bar-Hillel and Budescu, 1995; Price, 2000). Granberg and Brent (1983) favor Heider's (1958) balance theory as explanation for wishful thinking. Because the surveys used in the analyses below do not allow a test of the precise psychological mechanisms, the review will not address this issue in more detail.

Partisan preferences are expected to introduce a directional partisan bias, but they might have non-partisan implications as well. Voters with a strong party identification and clearly defined political preferences should exhibit a higher degree of political interest and involvement than voters without these convictions. All else being equal, a partisan voter is invested in the political system, and as a "member of the polity" (Lewis-Beck and Skalaban, 1989, p. 153) likely to be familiar with the parties, their approximate electoral strengths, and likely coalitions (Armstrong and Duch, 2010; Meffert and Gschwend, 2010, 2011). If these claims are correct, partisan preferences should have two distinct effects. They should play a unique and central

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