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Learning to make votes count: The role of democratic experience[☆]

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Abstract

This paper argues that strategic voting in young democracies increases as voters become more experienced with the functioning of democracy. This proposition is tested with election results from the democracies of Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Union. The amount of wasted votes decreases with time, controlling for the number of lists running, the electoral system, the legal threshold, and the amount of votes for the leading list. The study contributes to the literature on strategic voting and democratic consolidation in Eastern Europe.

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Voting is the central act of democracy. However, as a means for achieving policy goals, it is not a simple act. If a vote were cast according to one's sincere preferences for a party or a candidate who has no chance of exerting influence on the political decisions after the elections, the vote would be "wasted." Alternatively, a vote cast strategically for a less preferred party would help to fulfill the representational and

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policy-related objective of voting. In terms of the aggregate electoral coordination, the failure to recognize the situations of strategic voting and act upon them also poses difficulties for the emergence of stable party systems and consolidation of democratic regimes in general (see Cox, 1997; Duch and Palmer, 2002; Toka, 1997). Finding out whether voters are able to learn from their democratic experience has important implications for the expectations about democratic consolidation and stability. The question is also important in the context of the ongoing academic debate about whether the young East European democracies are gradually stabilizing or continuing to experience electoral volatility (Tworzecki, 2003).

This paper asks whether people become more strategic in their voting behavior if they have a prolonged experience with democratic processes. We argue that the electorates in nascent democracies learn not to waste their votes on non-viable candidates or lists. The next section of the paper will present the theoretical argument behind the learning model. The third section describes the empirical data used and presents the results of the analyses. We consider aggregate level data on voting behavior across a number of democracies of Central and Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Union during almost all democratic elections held to date. The analysis demonstrates that the length of the democratic experience, *ceteris paribus*, leads to a consistent and considerable decrease in the number of votes for non-viable lists.

The study makes several contributions to the understanding of the electoral dynamic in young democracies. First, the findings suggest that democratic processes in Eastern Europe are moving towards system stabilization, implying a difference in developmental stage rather than in the nature of the regime between nascent and mature democracies. Second, the study allows us to conclude that the electorates in nascent democracies are able to learn the political and policy consequences of their vote choice and to adjust their behavior accordingly. This, in turn, contributes to the stabilization of democracy in these countries. Third, and not less importantly, the reported findings reinforce the need to consider the *dynamics* of the political context in nascent democracies in order to make conclusions about democratic development.

1. Strategic voting and democratic development

Students of democratic consolidation have argued that the critical element in producing a stable democratic system is the institutionalization of a party system (Mainwaring and Scully, 1994; Morlino, 1995; Toka, 1997). This institutionalization resembles an equilibrium of an electoral coordination game proposed by Cox (1997): effective coordination follows the “market-clearing” expectations of voters and candidates that in the long run produce equilibrium between supply and demand. Successful electoral competition involves a reduction in the number of competitors and concentration of votes for the more viable lists or candidates.

Such equilibrium presumes rationality: the ability of voters to recognize and act upon situations where voting for one’s sincere preference leads to a less desirable outcome — getting no representation at all. The equilibrium also presumes the

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