



Exit polls, turnout, and bandwagon voting: Evidence from a natural experiment



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ABSTRACT

We exploit a voting reform in France to estimate the causal effect of exit poll information on turnout and bandwagon voting. Before the change in legislation, individuals in some French overseas territories voted after the election result had already been made public via exit poll information from mainland France. We estimate that knowing the exit poll information decreases voter turnout by about 11 percentage points. Our study is the first clean empirical design outside of the laboratory to demonstrate the effect of such knowledge on voter turnout. Furthermore, we find that exit poll information significantly increases bandwagon voting; that is, voters who choose to turn out are more likely to vote for the expected winner.

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1. Introduction

“A Californian plans to vote after work in what she believes to be a close presidential election. (She has little interest in the race for congressman for her district, although it is closer.) The day is rainy and as she approaches the polling place she sees a long line. On the radio she hears that one presidential candidate has a substantial lead in other states. She says why bother and turns her car around and drives home.” [Sudman \(1986, p. 332\)](#)

In August 2009, exit poll results for key regional elections in Germany were leaked on Twitter before voting ended. These polls showed that Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative party had much less support than in previous elections. Wolfgang Bosbach, deputy parliamentary head of Merkel's Christian Union bloc, said that the leaked results “damaged democracy” and a spokesman for the pro-business Free Democrats, Merkel's preferred coalition partner, commented that the leaks were “unacceptable.” In addition, such reporting is against the German law with a fine of up to 50,000 euros, so German election officials immediately began to investigate whether the Twitter messages violated the law.¹ The German

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¹ See [Carter \(2009\)](#).

case is not unusual: a survey of 66 countries worldwide finds that of the 59 that permit exit polls during an election, 41 prohibit publication of the results until after all voting has concluded (see [Spangenberg, 2003](#)).

Yet in recent 21st century elections, incidents similar to the 2009 Twitter controversy in Germany abound. In 2007, the websites of several Swiss and Belgian newspapers crashed when French citizens attempted to access exit poll results during an election, and in the 2012 French presidential election, results were also available online while voting was still in progress.² Countries with multiple time zones such as France, the United States, Canada or Russia, face particular difficulties, as voting takes place at different times in different regions.³ The notorious reporting on Floridian exit poll results in the 2000 United States presidential election occurred while voters in the western part of the state and the rest of the nation were still voting. In 2004 leaked US presidential exit poll results were commonly discussed among voters while east coast voters were still going to the ballot booths.⁴ With the proliferation of Twitter, Facebook, and other social media worldwide, the ability of governments to control and limit leaked exit polls both inside and outside their countries is becoming increasingly difficult.

Beyond the increasing ability of later voters to find out results of early voting on election day, many nations are also experimenting with “convenience voting,” in which voters can easily cast their ballots days or even weeks in advance of the official election day. As [Gronke et al. \(2007\)](#) report, almost half of the democratic nations in the EPIC Project database allow individuals to vote prior to the designated election day, with over a third allowing all voters this privilege. Convenience voting is particularly popular in the United States where voting by mail or at the mall is commonplace; 25% of U.S. voters in the 2006 elections used convenience voting methods (see [Gronke et al., 2007](#)).

In this paper, we make use of a unique natural experiment to consider whether the behavior of later voters is affected by exit poll information about earlier voter choices. Specifically, we exploit a 2005 voting reform in France to estimate the causal effect of exit poll information on turnout and bandwagon (or underdog) voting.⁵ Before the change in legislation, individuals in French western overseas territories voted after the mainland election results were already known via exit polls. Since 2005, the western overseas territories vote on the day before the mainland and hence those voters do not have any knowledge of the choices on the mainland or the eastern territories. This reform allows us to use a difference-in-difference strategy. It creates an exogenous variation in information for a well identified group of voters and provides therefore the setting for a natural experiment to study the effect of exit poll information on voters' behavior. Such an approach has two advantages. First, relative to existing studies on the West Coast effect, our natural experimental setting allows us to eliminate many of the possible caveats in the analysis of the causal effect of information by providing a counterfactual situation (same constituencies with and without exit poll information). Second, our study does not suffer from the possible concern about the ecological validity of the results, a criticism often raised about laboratory experiments.

Using this voting reform to study the effect of exit poll information, we find evidence that the public knowledge about such polls not only decreases turnout by about 11 percentage points, but also increases bandwagon voting. We therefore conclude that exit polls can indeed have consequential effects on voter behavior and that the advent of social media reporting on exit poll information may fundamentally change the democratic process in many countries where such information was previously unavailable.

Despite the growing tendency for voters to learn exit poll results while an election is ongoing, previous observational data-based research on the effects of such information on voting behavior is limited and inconclusive. One possible natural setting for exploring this issue is the so-called West Coast effect in the U.S.; that is, the release of early East Coast election returns before the polls close on the West Coast due to the fact that the presidential election takes place in three different continental time zones. The debate over this effect emerged in the early 1960s after the introduction of sophisticated computer models, improved survey techniques for predicting election results, and rapid access to media information. The first set of related studies, however, which explored the 1964 presidential election, showed barely any West Coast effect (see for example [McAllister and Studlar, 1991](#)).

A second set of major studies focused on the 1980 election,⁶ in which pre-election polls indicated a close election between Reagan and Carter, but Carter conceded defeat even before the polls closed in the west.⁷ However, although these researchers used a richer set of data (aggregated data on various elections, regional, data or congressional districts, or better

² See [Sayare \(2012\)](#).

³ The United States does not prohibit the reporting of exit poll results, so elections are often publicly decided before voters in Alaska and Hawaii have voted, and sometimes while voting in California and other western states is still ongoing. In Canada polls close at the same time across the country to reduce the potential of leaked results. In India, although the country is not subject to the same time zone issues, voting is conducted at different times in different regions for security reasons and reporting early results is illegal.

⁴ See [Best and Krueger \(2012\)](#) for a review.

⁵ By bandwagon voting, we mean that voters are more likely to vote for the predicted winner in an election and by underdog voting we mean the opposite.

⁶ It should be noted that other elections between 1964 and 1980 have also been explicitly analyzed. For example, [Tuchman and Coffin \(1971\)](#) explore the influence of election night television broadcasts on the close 1968 election but find no evidence that it affected voting.

⁷ NBC was also strongly criticized for declaring Ronald Reagan the President of the United States at 8:15PM eastern standard time based on its own computer projections: “Articles, reports, and letters were written describing how voting lines outside polling places disappeared, how turnout decreased over prior years, and how voters stayed home after it became apparent that their favored candidates had already won or lost” ([Leonardo, 1983, p. 297](#)). Criticism also emerged that national voter turnout decreased to 53.95% (the lowest rate since 1948, see [Dubois, 1983](#)). All this criticism led to a congressional hearing, journalistic commentary, private studies, and a task force report, as well as the proposition of remedial bills to regulate either poll closing times or the timing of network election predictions, but no action was taken once interest began to wane ([Leonardo, 1983](#); [Carpini, 1984](#)).

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